

**Drew Faust:  
'Race & the Meaning of America'**

# **The New York Review** **of Books**

December 17, 2015 / Volume LXII, Number 20

**HOLIDAY ISSUE**



**MICHAEL  
IGNATIEFF  
After Paris:  
The Refugees  
& ISIS**

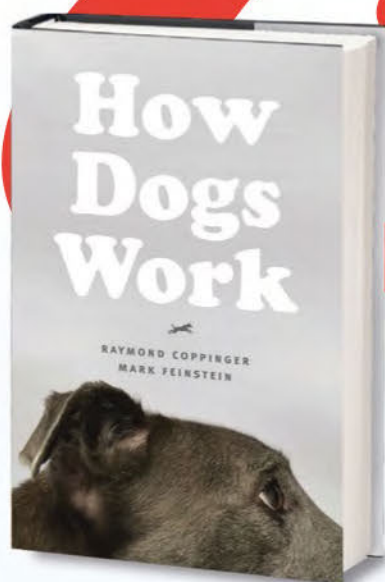
**MICHAEL MASSING  
A NEW KIND OF  
JOURNALISM!**

**INGRID ROWLAND  
The Hand of  
Del Sarto**



**PAUL KRUGMAN  
'Saving Capitalism:  
For the Many...'**





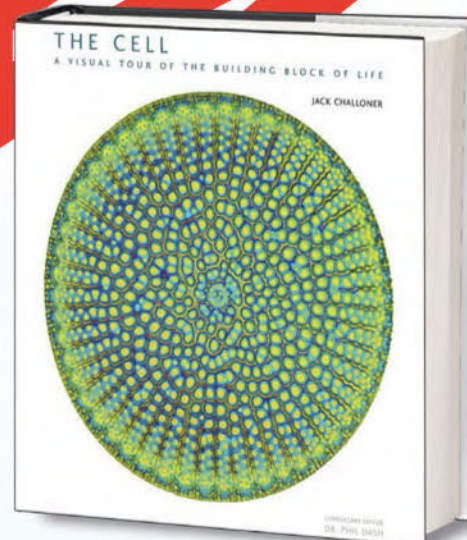
## HOW DOGS WORK

Raymond Coppinger and Mark Feinstein

Foreword by Gordon M. Burghardt

"Almost everything you think you know about dogs is wrong. Forget the loyal companion stereotype, or the idea you've got to show you're the alpha of the pack. Ethologists Coppinger and Feinstein present this most familiar of animals in a new object light, analyzing their anatomy and behavior with science rather than sentimentality."—*Discover*

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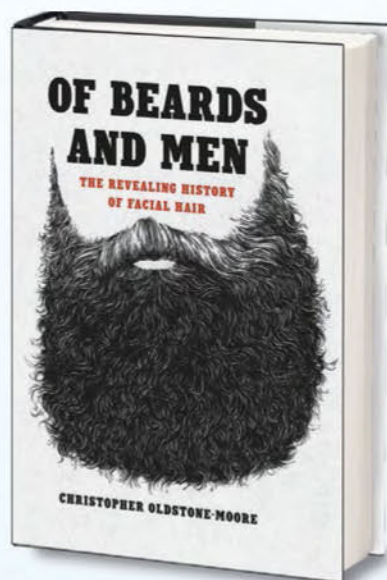


## THE CELL

*A Visual Tour of the Building Block of Life*  
Jack Challoner

In this beautifully illustrated book, Challoner covers the cell's rich, enigmatic history. He explores how this minuscule life-factory has been able to create and disassemble life on Earth over billions of years. He also unpacks the intricate process of cells interacting to create an astonishing array of unique plant, aquatic, terrestrial, and avian life.

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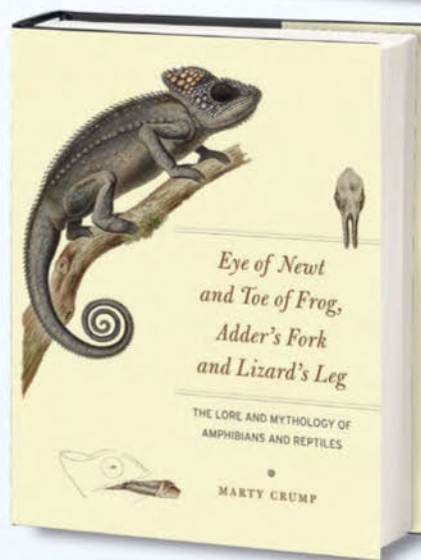
## OF BEARDS AND MEN

*The Revealing History of Facial Hair*

Christopher Oldstone-Moore

"Engaging . . . Readers will be enlightened as Oldstone-Moore links facial hair to gender perceptions, religious doctrine, military discipline, philosophical schools of thought, and more."—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

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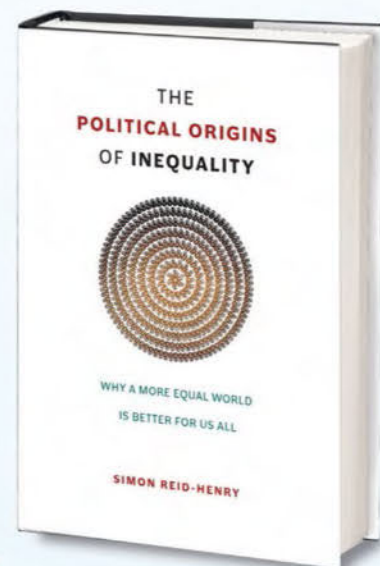
## EYE OF NEWT AND TOE OF FROG, ADDER'S FORK AND LIZARD'S LEG

*The Lore and Mythology of Amphibians and Reptiles*

Marty Crump

"Wonderful and unusual, emotionally and intellectually captivating, this is an important, timely book—and the ending is superb."—Harry W. Greene, author of *Snakes*

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## THE POLITICAL ORIGINS OF INEQUALITY

*Why a More Equal World Is Better for Us All*

Simon Reid-Henry

"This is an important book about big issues, dismissive of facile solutions: it should change the terms of the debate on why the gaps between us are so wide and what we could do about them."—Danny Dorling, author of *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists*

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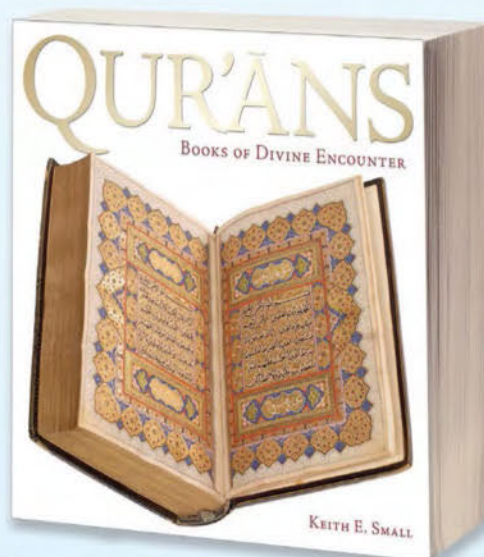
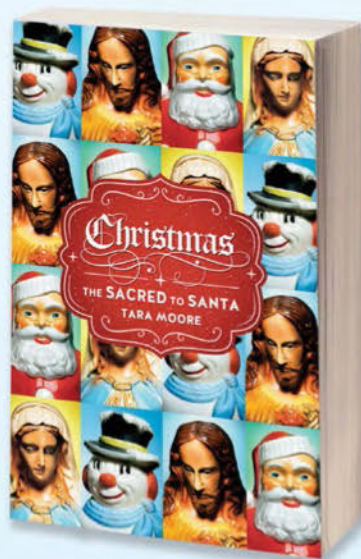
## CHRISTMAS

*The Sacred to Santa*

Tara Moore

"An informative and intriguing page-turner. If there is anything to be known about Christmas, you will find it here."—*Catholic San Francisco*

PAPER \$20.00



## QUR'ANS

*Books of Divine Encounter*

Keith E. Small

"Small presents a beautiful array of Qur'an manuscripts from different periods and with different technical and aesthetic qualities. This work offers readers an extraordinary introduction to the ways in which Muslims have preserved and ornamented their scripture through the centuries."—Gabriel Said Reynolds, University of Notre Dame

PAPER \$25.00

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## THE RUBÁIYÁT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM

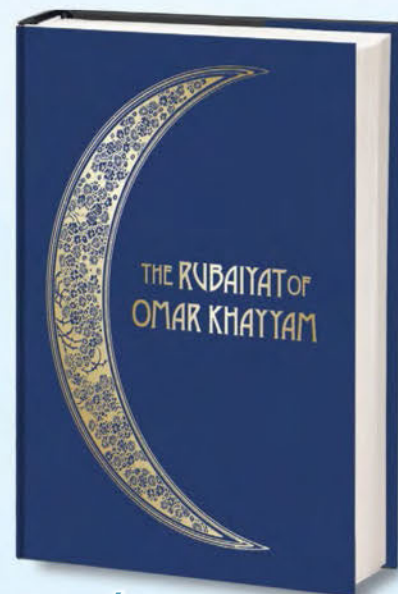
*Illustrated Collector's Edition*

Omar Khayyám

*Translated by Edward Fitzgerald with Illustrations by René Bull*

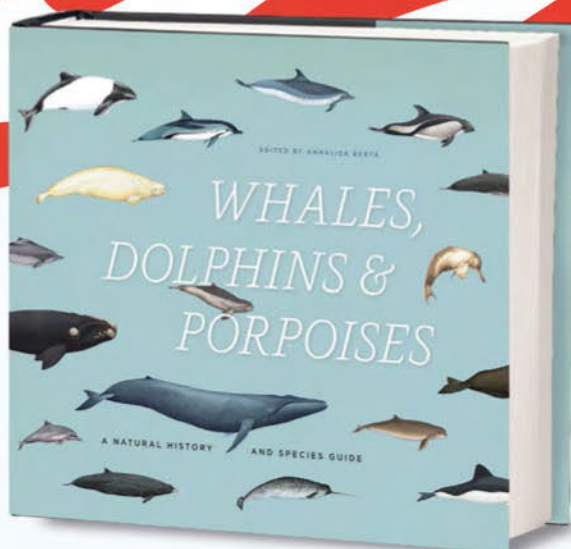
This collector's edition of *The Rubáiyát* features stunning full-color illustrations created by René Bull in 1913 that interpret the poem's brilliant sensual imagery and provide the perfect complement to Fitzgerald's translation, which remains the most famous.

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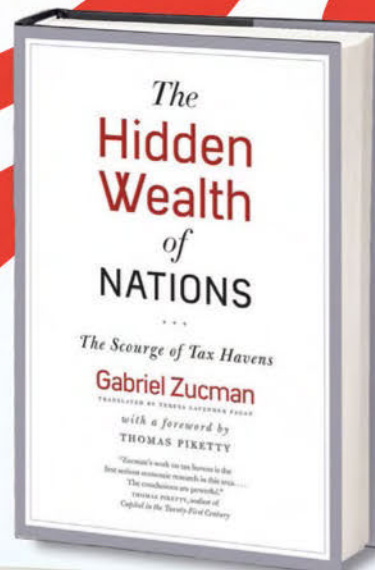
## WHALES, DOLPHINS, AND PORPOISES

*A Natural History and Species Guide*

Edited by Annalisa Berta

In this beautifully illustrated book, Annalisa Berta draws on the contributions of fellow whale biologists to present the most comprehensive, authoritative account ever published of these remarkable aquatic mammals.

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## THE HIDDEN WEALTH OF NATIONS

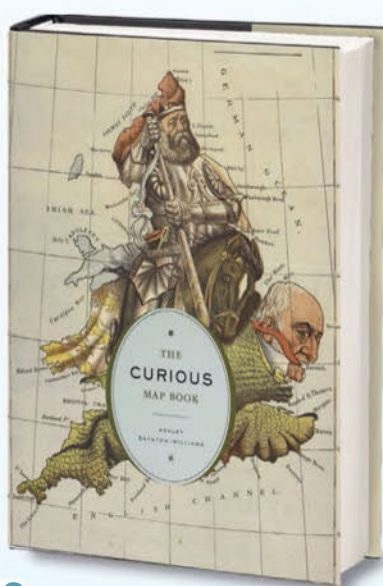
*The Scourge of Tax Havens*

Gabriel Zucman

With a Foreword by Thomas Piketty

"Zucman is a sometime co-author with Thomas Piketty and his new book *The Hidden Wealth of Nations* is set to do for tax havens what his colleague's did for wealth inequality: define and popularize the problem."—*Guardian*

CLOTH \$20.00



## THE CURIOUS MAP BOOK

Ashley Baynton-Williams

Baynton-Williams has unearthed a wide array of the whimsical and fantastic maps, from maps of board games to political ones, maps of the Holy Land to maps of the human soul. In his illuminating introduction, he also identifies key themes of map production, peculiar styles, and the commerce and collection of unique maps.

CLOTH \$45.00



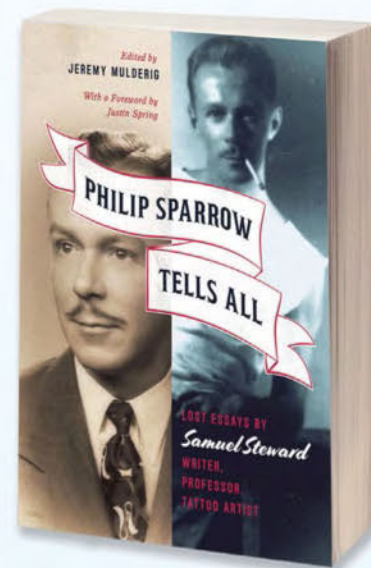
## THE DEAD LADIES PROJECT

*Exiles, Expats, and Ex-Countries*

Jessa Crispin

"A book of vigorous struggle and lucid confusion. It's also very, very funny. . . . *The Dead Ladies Project* is all over the place in terms of subject matter: sex, politics, history, philosophy, existential dread, gender dictates, difficult travel logistics, etc. . . . But that's exactly what it needs to be: a rambling polymorphous beast, as raw as it is sophisticated, as quirky as it is intense."—*Chicago Tribune*

PAPER \$16.00



## PHILIP SPARROW TELLS ALL

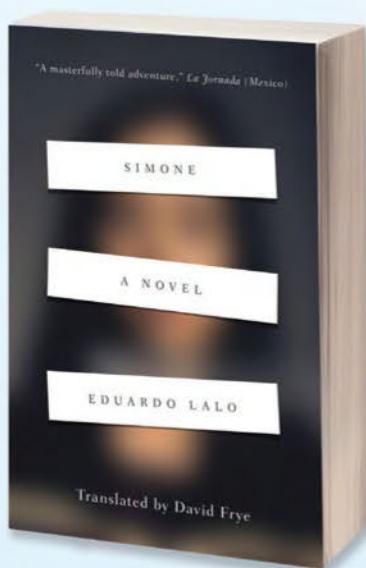
*Lost Essays by Samuel Steward, Writer, Professor, Tattoo Artist*

Samuel Steward

Edited by Jeremy Mulderig • With a Foreword by Justin Spring

"I suspected, for a moment, that *Philip Sparrow Tells All* was a prank, either by the University of Chicago Press or on it. The essays of a tattoo artist recovered from 70-year-old issues of the *Illinois Dental Journal*? Come on. . . . With the measure of safety provided by a pseudonym, Steward experimented with the comic, personal and confessional modes of the casual essay in ways that might have been difficult to risk otherwise."—*Times Higher Education*

PAPER \$20.00



## SIMONE

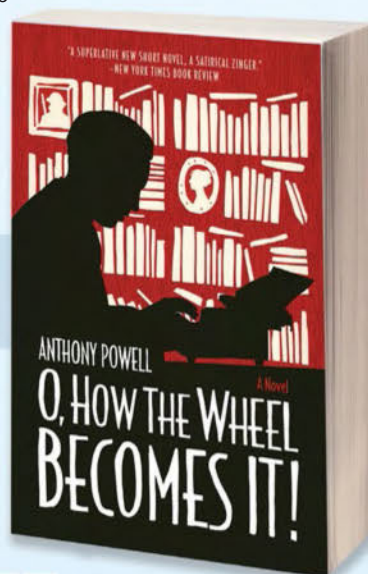
*A Novel*

Eduardo Lalo

Translated by David Frye

"A clear-eyed vision of the Puerto Rican margins. . . . It can seem an oddly structured novel, yet it works—especially as a whole—surprisingly well, and the shifts in Lalo's narrative make for a story that doesn't simply chug along predictably from the outset but expands, in breadth and depth, into an ultimately rich, rewarding work."—*Complete Review*

PAPER \$17.00



## O, HOW THE WHEEL BECOMES IT!

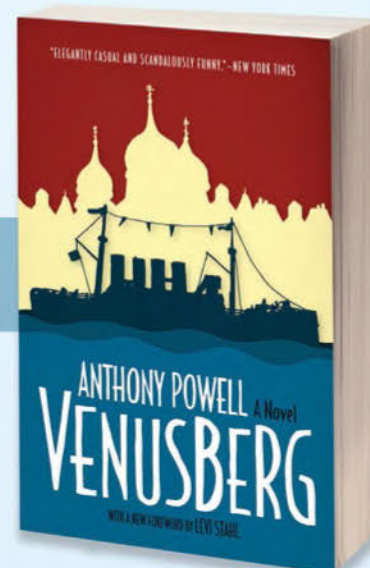
*A Novel*

Anthony Powell

"A distillation of all that is inimitable about its author—deflation of high seriousness and the pursuit of esteem at the expense of others, achieved with rigorous understatement; a wryness that is never mocking or arch; and a sense of pathos just offstage."—*New York Times Book Review*

PAPER \$15.00

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## VENUSBERG

*A Novel*

Anthony Powell

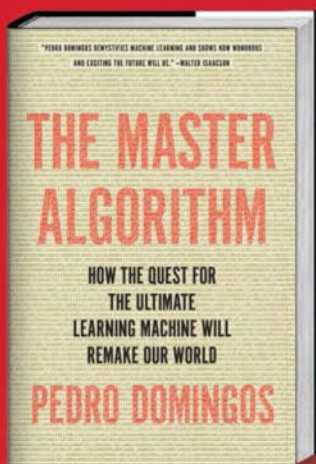
With a New Foreword by Levi Stahl

"A brilliant picture of diplomatic and less exalted society in a little Baltic State. Mr. Powell's dialogue and comments are crisp, shrewd, and satirical."—*Spectator*

"Elegantly casual and scandalously funny."—*New York Times*

PAPER \$16.00





### THE MASTER ALGORITHM

"Machine learning could help us do everything from curing cancer to building humanoid robots. Pedro Domingos demystifies machine learning and shows how wondrous and exciting the future will be."

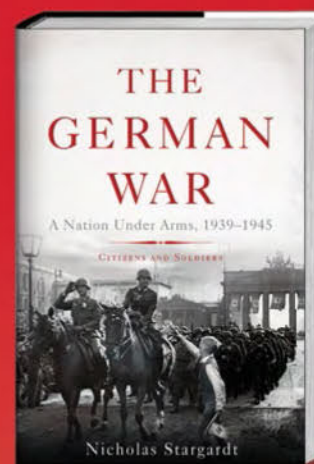
—WALTER ISAACSON



### FIRST BITE

"Bee Wilson is the ultimate food scholar. *First Bite* is a brilliant study of how we form our food preferences and how we may be able to change them. Her narrative kept me hungry for more until the very end."

—YOTAM OTTOLENGHI



### THE GERMAN WAR

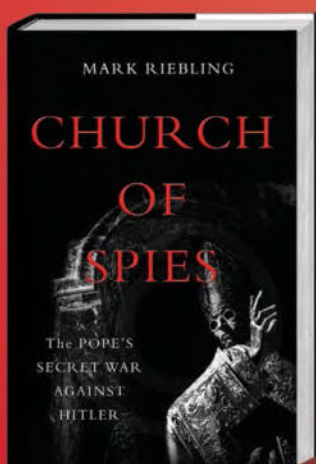
"Splendid scholarship.... Anyone interested in National Socialist Germany, World War II, and the many murderous regimes that still disfigure the earth should relish *The German War*."

—*WALL STREET JOURNAL*

# BRAIN CANDY



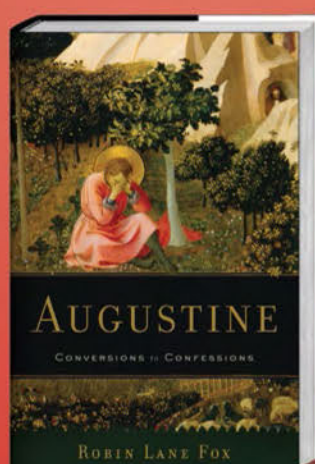
SMART GIFTS *from* BASIC BOOKS



### CHURCH OF SPIES

"An important and compelling addition to the debate over the legacy of Pius XII, the most powerful and complex pope of modern times."

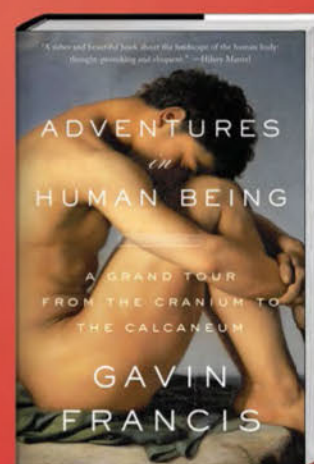
—GERALD POSNER,  
author of *God's Bankers*



### AUGUSTINE

"Any reader interested in one of the early church's most influential figures, a saint we know more about than any other from the ancient world, will find this stimulating biography a pleasure to read."

—*TIMES* (LONDON)



### ADVENTURES IN HUMAN BEING

"*Adventures in Human Being*, with its deft mix of the clinical and the lyrical, is a triumph of the eloquent brain and the compassionate heart."

—*WALL STREET JOURNAL*





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On the cover: Egyptians attending a vigil at the Giza pyramids for the victims of the recent attacks—claimed by ISIS—on Paris, Beirut, and the Russian passenger jet that exploded over the Sinai Peninsula, November 15, 2015 (Amr Abdallah Dalsh/Reuters); Andrea del Sarto, *Portrait of a Young Man* (detail), circa 1517–1518 (National Gallery, London). The illustration on page 16 is by James Ferguson. The drawing on page 61 is by Pancho. The drawing on page 84 is by David Levine. The painting on page 48 is © Picasso Estate 2015.

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THE ROOSEVELT DOLLAR

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“A compelling examination of a still-vilified monetary policy that has continued to show results in spite of conservative criticism.”  
—KIRKUS REVIEWS

“As an introduction to the economic debates taking place in London and Washington in the 1930s and 1940s, Mr. Rauchway’s work could not be bettered.”  
—ECONOMIST

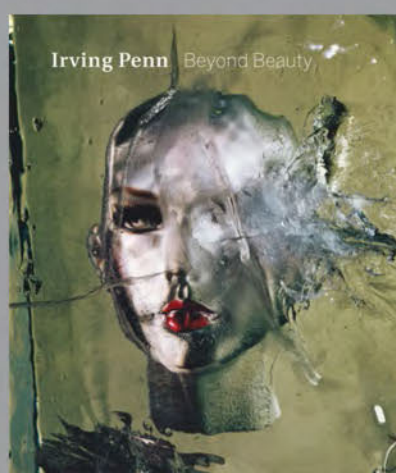
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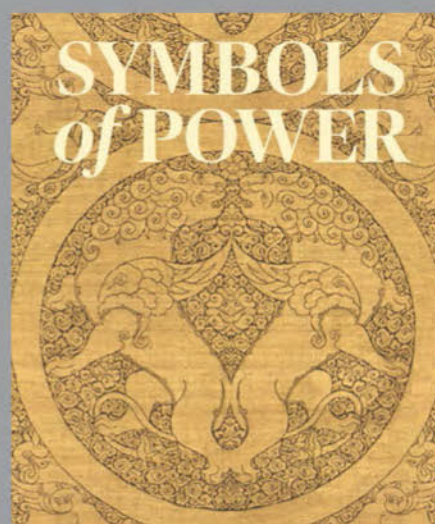




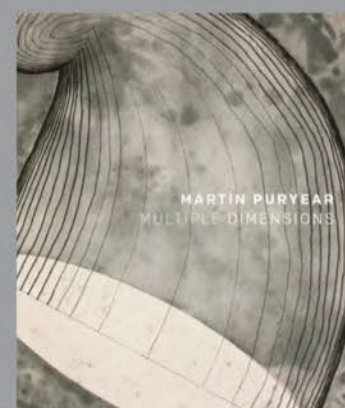
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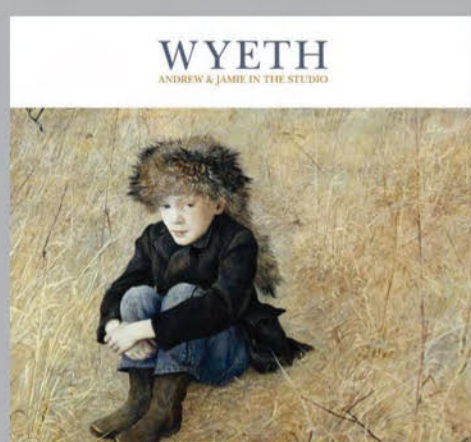
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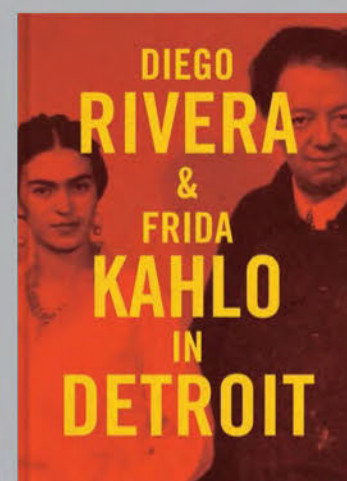
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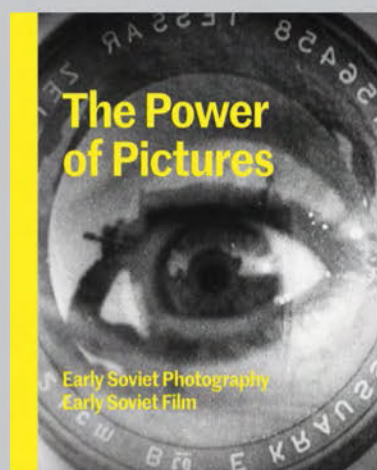
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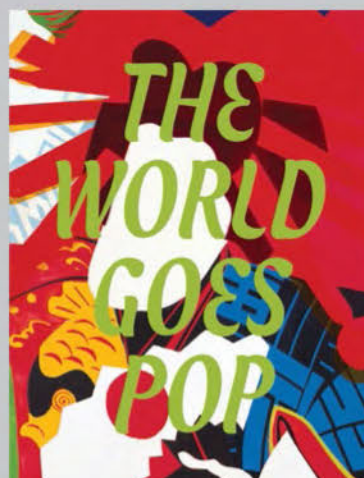
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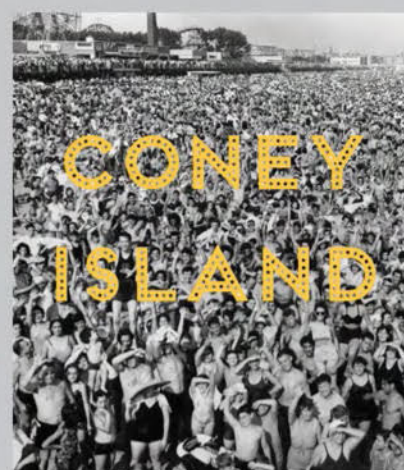
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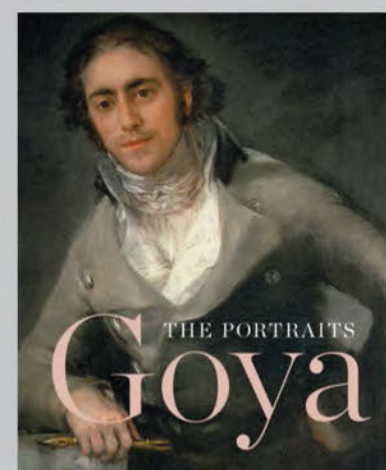
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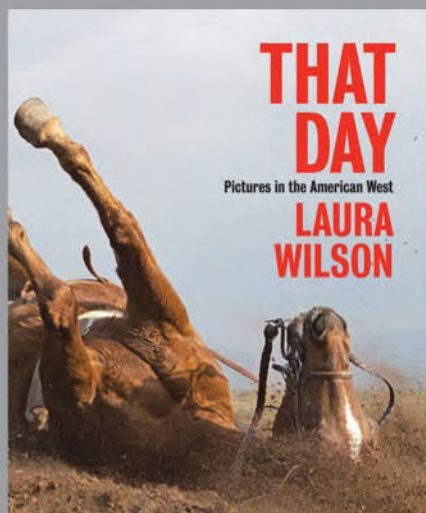


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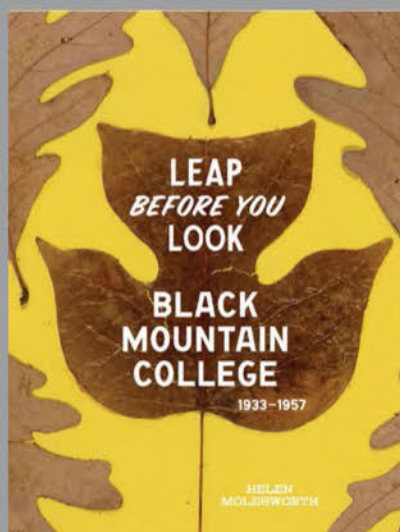




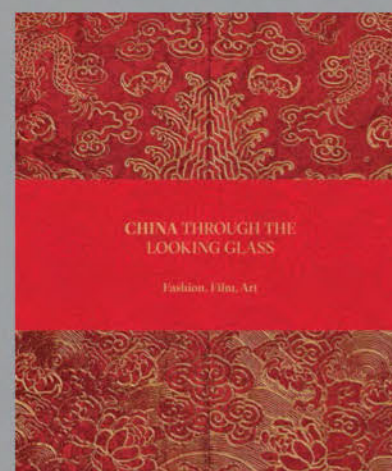
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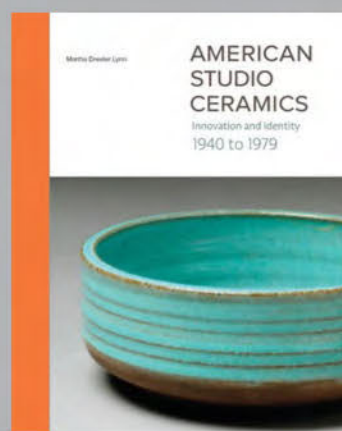
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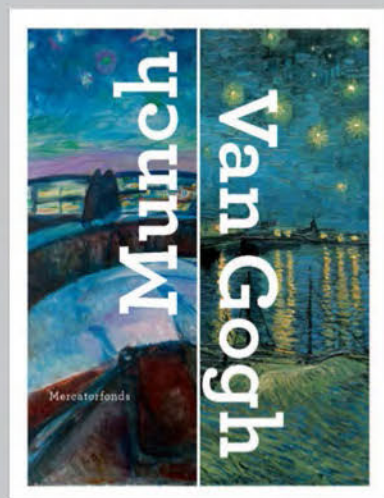
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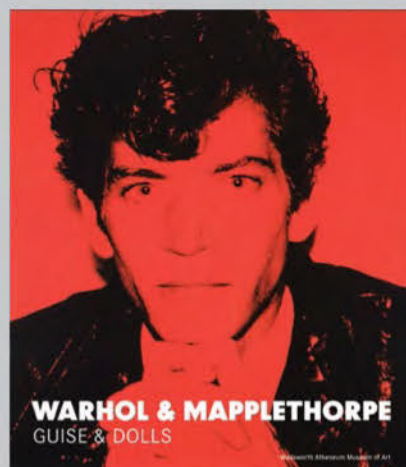
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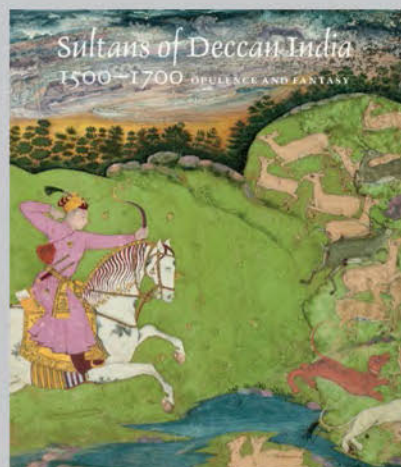
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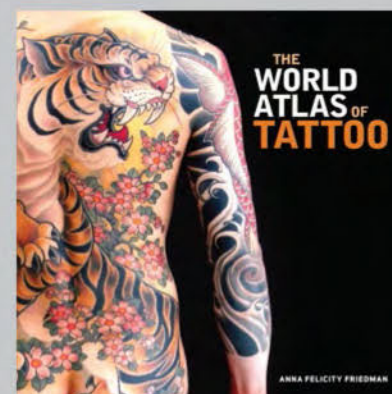
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# The Refugees & the New War

Michael Ignatieff

## 1.

Strategists will tell you that it is a mistake to fight the battle your enemies want you to fight. You should impose your strategy on them, not let them impose theirs on you. These lessons apply to the struggle with the leaders of ISIS. We have applied pressure upon them in Syria; they have replied with atrocious attacks in Ankara, Beirut, and now Paris. They are trying to provoke an apocalyptic confrontation with the Crusader infidels. We should deny them this opportunity.

ISIS wants to convince the world of the West's indifference to the suffering of Muslims; so we should demonstrate the opposite. ISIS wants to drag Syria ever further into the inferno; so ending the Syrian war should become the first priority of the Obama administration's final year in office. Already Secretary of State John Kerry has brought together the Russians, Iranians, and Saudis to develop the outlines of a transition in Syria. Sooner rather than later, no matter how difficult this may prove, the meetings in Vienna will have to include representatives of the Syrian regime and non-ISIS Syrian fighters. The goal would be to establish a cease-fire between the regime and its opponents, so that the fight against ISIS can be waged to a conclusion and displaced Syrians can return home. Destroying the ISIS project to establish a caliphate will not put an end to jihadi nihilism, but it will decisively erode ISIS's ideological allure.

A successful campaign against nihilism will have to resist nihilism itself. If, as Gilles Kepel, a French specialist on Islam, has argued, ISIS is trying to provoke civil war in France, then the French state must not deploy tactics that will lose it the loyalty of its most vulnerable and susceptible citizens.<sup>1</sup> Detention without trial, mass deportations, harsh physical interrogations, sealing borders, ending free circulation of people in Europe: all these tactics—proposed by the right-wing demagogue Marine Le Pen—will tempt French and other European authorities, but they are disastrous as a strategy. A successful campaign against Islamic extremism should deepen, not undermine, allegiance toward *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, especially among Muslim citizens.

ISIS strategy also seeks to make Europeans think of refugees as potential security threats rather than the victims that they are. It is of some importance that ISIS not succeed in its aim of spreading strategic disinformation. It has had some success. Before the Paris attacks, the Swedish government reinstated border controls. After the attacks, the Polish government announced that it wouldn't accept the nine thousand refugees the EU had allocated to Poland for resettlement. A Syrian passport was found near the body of one of the suicide bombers at the Stade de France, and this discovery pointed a finger of suspicion at other refugees. If ISIS planted the passport, it had reason to

do so.<sup>2</sup> It does not want Europe to give a home to anyone fleeing its caliphate.

So far, more than a few European leaders have seen through the ISIS campaign of strategic disinformation. The head of the European Commission and the speaker of the European Parliament have declared that Europe must not allow ISIS to dictate the terms of its refugee policy. American state governors and Republican candidates for president, on the other hand, have been calling for a ban on Syrian refugees in the US. This is fear masquerading as prudence. Canada, Australia, and Britain, countries that have been attacked by terrorists, have not backed away from their commitment to take Syrian refugees, and



Egyptians attending a vigil at the Giza pyramids, near Cairo, for the victims of the recent attacks—claimed by ISIS—on Paris, Beirut, and the Russian passenger jet that exploded over the Sinai Peninsula, November 15, 2015

the US shouldn't either. To bar refugees from US borders would allow the enemy to dictate the terms of the battle. The US has every reason—moral, humanitarian, and strategic—to refuse to give in to fear and to continue to provide refuge for those escaping barbarism.

## 2.

The Paris attacks make it easy to forget a scandalous fact: 3,329 people have died trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe so far this year. Still more are drowning every week. They are drowning in sight of the island of Lesbos in Greece or off the Italian island of Lampedusa. Others are dying trapped inside refrigerator trucks on the roadside in Austria; they are dying inside the Channel Tunnel, trying to reach Great Britain; as the winter darkens, some may die of exposure on the trek up through the Balkans. Later generations will ask how European leaders let this happen.

Hannah Arendt, exiled in 1933, stripped of her German citizenship in 1937, later taking flight from Vichy France and finally reaching New York in 1941, also wondered how Europe had betrayed the stateless in her own time. In 1948, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she observed that it was citizenship that gives human beings the "right to have rights." As for stateless persons, she concluded, they ought to

have rights simply because they are human, but her own experience had taught her a different lesson:

If a human being loses his political status, he should, according to the implications of the inborn and inalienable rights of man, come under exactly the situation for which the declarations of such general rights provided. Actually the opposite is the case. It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man.<sup>3</sup>

The passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the Refugee Convention in 1951, and the European Convention on Human Rights in

1953 was supposed to give the stateless the right to have rights. States who signed these documents were not allowed to let stateless people drown in their waters and were not supposed to send them back home if they were likely to be tortured; they were entitled to a hearing to make their claim to stay. Anyone, in the words of the Refugee Convention, who fled a "well-founded fear of being persecuted" had a right to claim refuge in any country that ratified the convention. Thanks to the human rights revolution after 1945, Europe thought it had proven Arendt wrong. Now that we have seen a dead toddler face down, washed up on the gravel of a Turkish beach, Arendt may have been right after all.

The Refugee Convention of 1951 has been overwhelmed by the reality of 2015. The 11 million people who have fled Syria are not, for the most part, fleeing literally from the Refugee Convention's "well-founded fear of being persecuted." They are fleeing violent death: from Assad's barrel bombs, Russian and American air strikes, ISIS beheadings, militia murders and persecution. The UN authorized a new doctrine in 2005—the responsibility to protect (R2P)—that mandates state intervention when a tyrant like Assad makes war on his own citizens, but R2P is a dead letter in Syria.

A safe zone on the Turkish border, protected by air cover and ground troops, could have sheltered displaced populations, but nobody except the Kurds provided the necessary troops for doing this; so protecting the displaced

inside Syria has ceased to be a workable option. As for a cease-fire that would allow civilian populations to return to government-held and rebel-held territory, this remains a cruel mirage. Resettlement elsewhere is the only practical policy for the foreseeable future.

When the drowned child on the Turkish beach appeared on American television screens in September, seventy-two House Democrats, fourteen Democratic senators, and a few Republicans aligned with the USA Refugee Council and other American resettlement agencies to urge the president to take in Syrian refugees. His response—raising the Syrian refugee quota to 10,000, then 15,000—satisfied no one. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has identified 130,000 Syrian refugees in camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan who need permanent refuge in other countries because they are uniquely vulnerable—orphans, for example, or badly injured victims of torture or recent attack—and the UNHCR has asked the US to take half of them, in other words, 65,000 people. The administration replies that it will take eighteen to twenty-four months to process anyone; everyone must be vetted at least twice so no terrorist sleeper cells slip through; and besides, America has already done enough: it contributes the lion's share—\$450 million—to the UNHCR's funding needs in Syria.

Before the Paris attacks, polls said Americans were in favor of helping refugees. In the wake of the attacks, it is safe to assume that this is no longer the case. Taking its cue from the public, the Obama administration is likely to keep on treating Europe's refugee crisis as if it were chiefly Angela Merkel's responsibility.

This is a political error as well as a moral mistake. If it fails to offer Chancellor Merkel tangible support by taking in refugees itself, the United States weakens Merkel domestically and hastens her downfall. By taking so few Syrian refugees—the US has admitted only 1,854 since 2012—while its European allies flounder in the face of the flood of humanity, the US is strengthening the anti-American, anti-immigration populist right wing across the Continent. If US inaction hastens the arrival to power in France of reactionary anti-American demagogues like Marine Le Pen, the Obama administration will share some of the blame. US solidarity with Europe always matters but it matters especially now that Russia is challenging Europe's eastern borders. By failing to assist Europe, the president allows Eastern European leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orbán to drift ever closer to the Russian orbit and to disseminate Vladimir Putin's repulsive fiction of a Christian Europe beset by Muslim hordes.

Americans may still feel the refugee crisis is none of their business, but Europeans increasingly feel otherwise—and so do the refugees. The human flight from Syria is a mass plebiscite on the failure of US and Western policy in the Levant. Syrians have reached the conclusion that the US–Saudi–Gulf State proxy war to upend Assad has failed; that their country will burn down to the waterline before Assad ever leaves; that peace will not return before their children are grown up; and that even if peace does come there will

<sup>1</sup>Gilles Kepel, "L'État islamique cherche à déclencher une guerre civile," *Le Monde*, November 14, 2015.

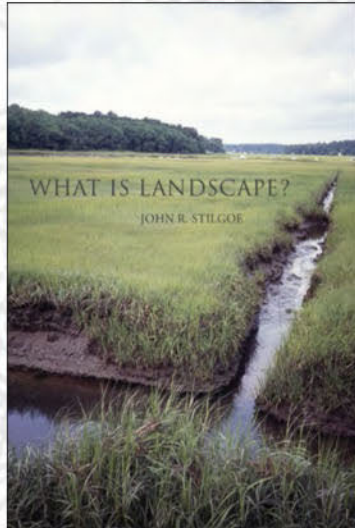
<sup>2</sup>Patrick Kingsley, "Why Syrian Refugee Passport Found at Paris Attack Scene Must Be Treated with Caution," *The Guardian*, November 15, 2015.

<sup>3</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt, 1968), p. 300.





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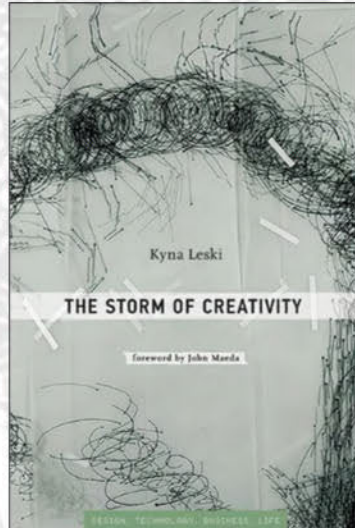
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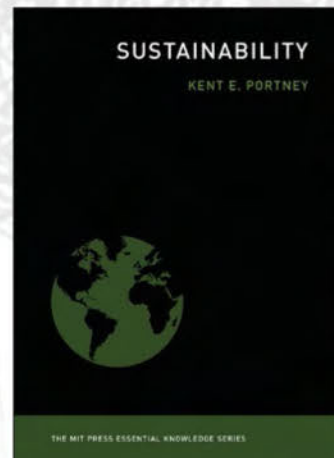
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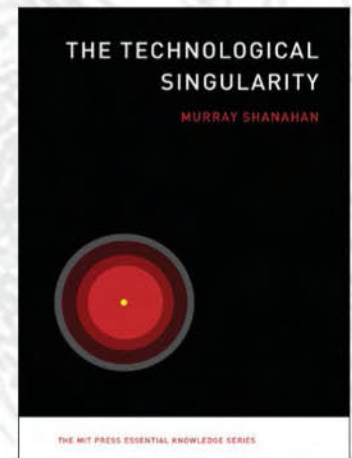


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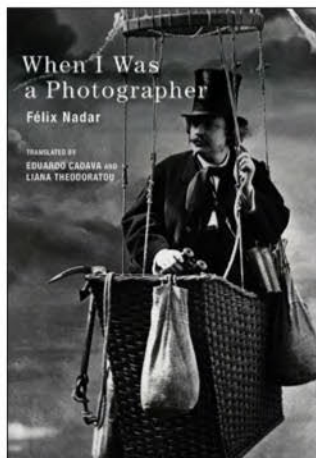


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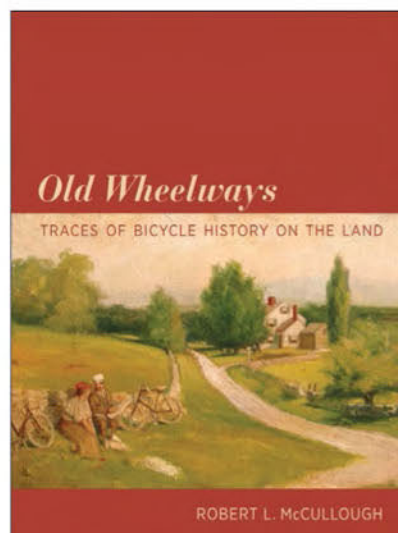


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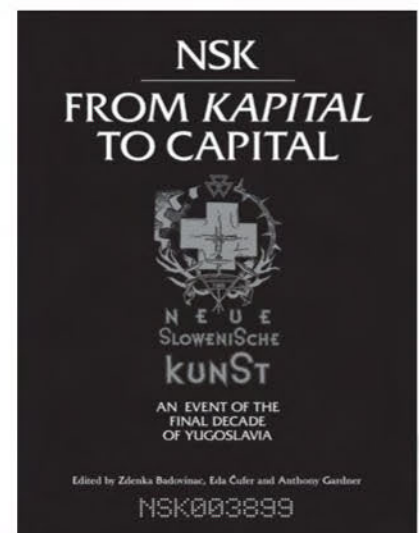
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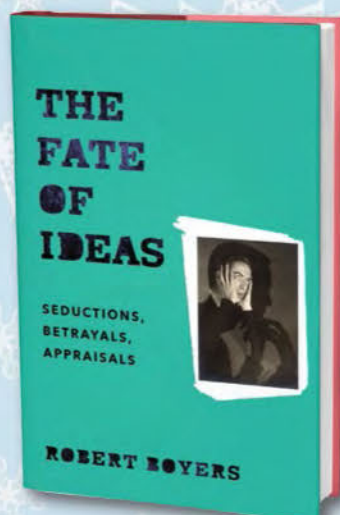
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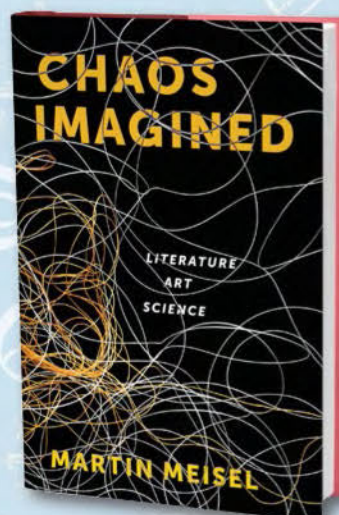


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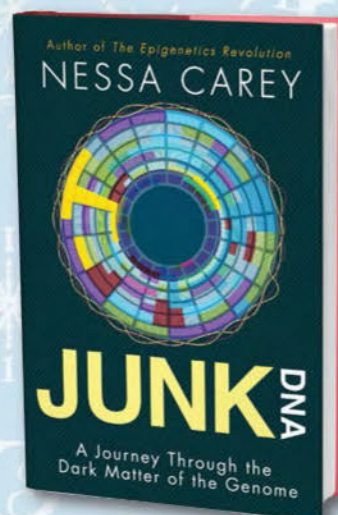
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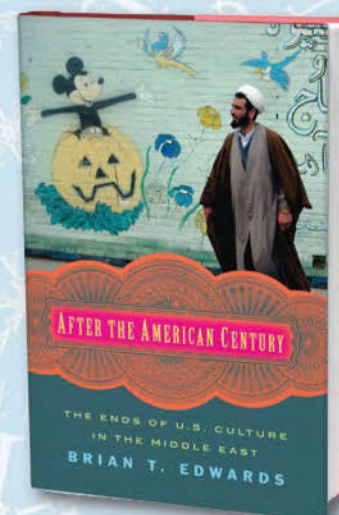
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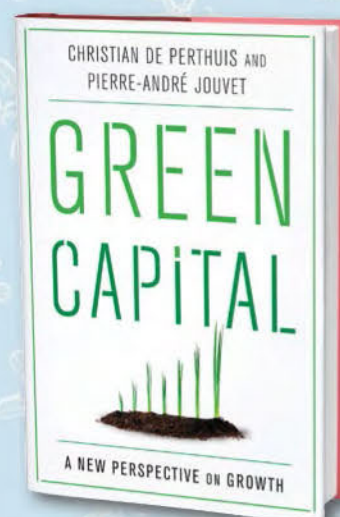
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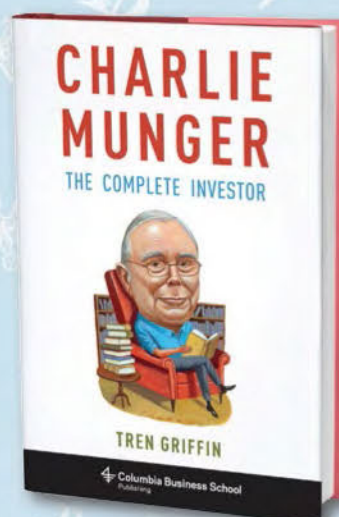
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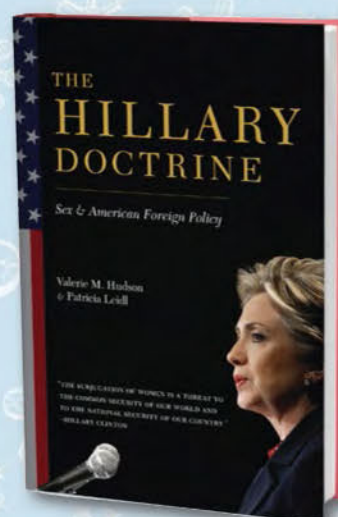
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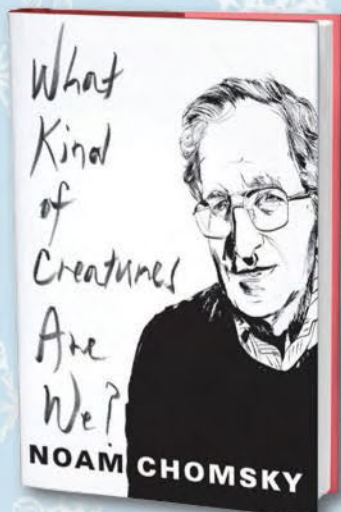
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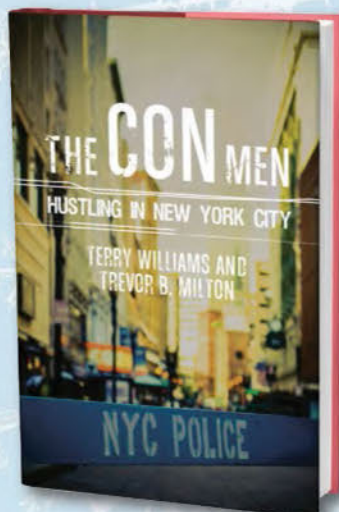


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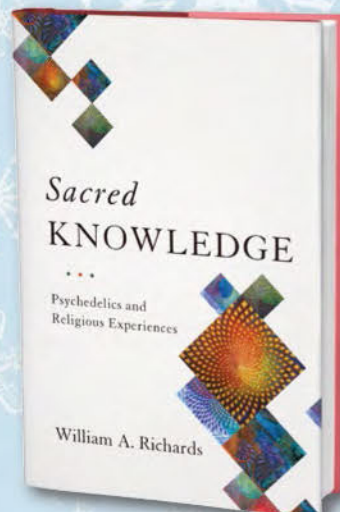
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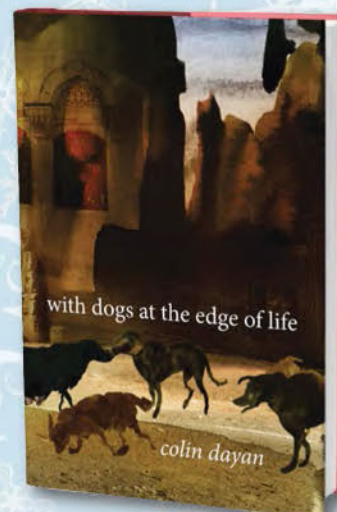
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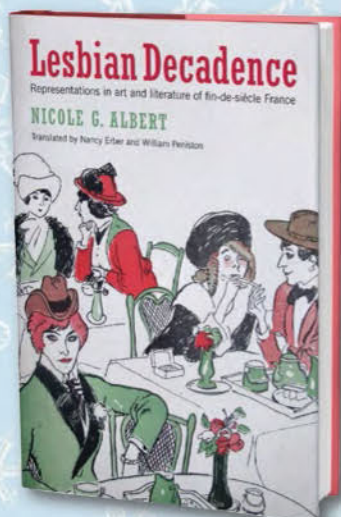
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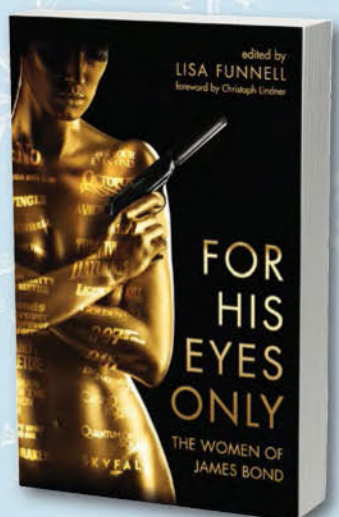
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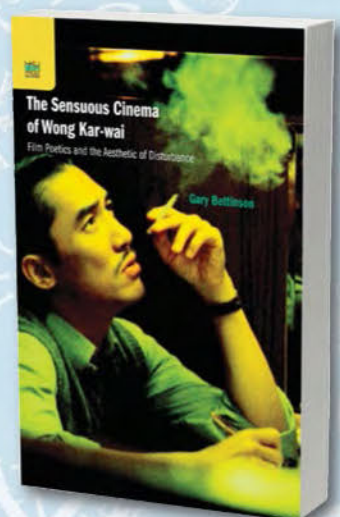
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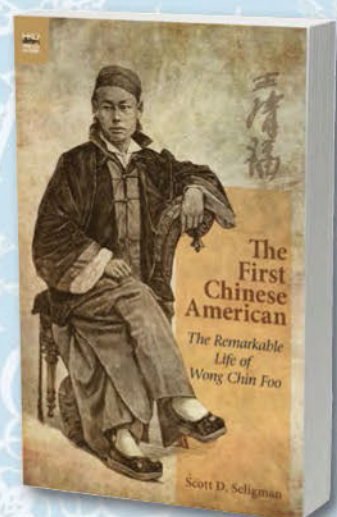
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be nothing to return to in Homs, Kobani, or Aleppo.

Syrians are now leaving refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon where the World Food Program e-card ration is down to 50 cents a day, and where the UNHCR Syria appeal is 50 percent underfunded; their cell phones told them instantly in late August that Germany was waiving visa requirements and so they are heading for the north. It is not madness but political despair that leads mothers and fathers to risk the drowning of their children in a bid for safety and a new life.

They are flooding into a Germany torn between wanting to demonstrate, in the warmth of its welcome, that it has overcome its tormented past, and wondering how to cope with the unstoppable flow. The US cannot afford to let the gap with Germany widen still further. Germans have good reason to believe that while they are bearing the consequences of the collapse of Syria, it is America that bears responsibility for its causes. Even former British Prime Minister Tony Blair has admitted that the rise of ISIS and the disintegration of Syria figure among the catastrophic consequences of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>4</sup>

Chancellor Merkel cannot have anticipated what she brought upon herself by opening Germany's borders, and she must have been astonished by the speed with which hope travels along the migration path by cell phone. When a *Time* magazine photographer asked refugees to show him their most precious possession, many showed him their cell phone. Now that migrant and refugee chains are technologically empowered, the flood, often guided by professional smugglers, will find a way around every new barrier put in its path.

In the processing centers the Germans have set up in disused army barracks (I visited one north of Munich in late October) exhausted public employees and volunteers are trying to separate out bona fide refugees—most of the Syrians by and large—from migrants from less tormented places. Kosovars, Albanians, Serbs, Macedonians, and Montenegrins will be sent back, but so also will Pakistanis, Afghans, Somalis, Eritreans, even Libyans.

Merkel risks losing power if she cannot show that she has her borders under control. She has refused, thus far, to seal her frontiers with razor wire, and she has refused, crucially, to put an upper ceiling on the number of refugee claims that Germany will process. Both decisions are admirable, but her political survival depends on swift but lawful repatriation to safe third countries of those who fail to qualify. In other countries too, the political legitimacy of refugee resettlement depends on adjudicated repatriation of economic migrants. Yet case-by-case decisions about who is a migrant and who is a refugee are bound to be arbitrary. Afghans, Libyans, and Somalis will also claim they are fleeing violent death and it may prove impossible to send them back.

The Refugee Convention regime of 1951 is no longer adequate, since, as has been said, most refugees are not fleeing a well-founded fear of being persecuted, as the convention calls it,

but a well-founded fear of violent death in states torn apart by civil war or terrorized by tyrants. The world badly needs a new migratory regime—based around an internationally authorized biometric ID card, with a date of permitted entry and a mandatory exit—that legalizes migratory flows from south to north, so that southern countries benefit from the remittances sent home and northern ones benefit from the labor and ingenuity their aging populations need.

The flood of peoples—the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates there are 60 million displaced in the world, up from 40 million in 2000—lays bare a new reality. In the cold war order of tyranny, closed borders and limited communications combined to keep victims of human



Refugees and migrants waiting to cross the border from Greece to Macedonia, October 2015

rights abuse locked up in the same country with their oppressors. Now, in the age of open borders and free exit, people are flowing out, and with them, the saving distance that kept zones of danger apart from zones of safety has collapsed. Nations in the north that fail to invest in the stability of their neighbors in the south can expect to see the people of the south—and terrorists too—on their doorsteps.

The Europeans have just announced additional billions of aid to African states to strengthen their border controls, improve their human rights, and fortify their institutions. Development assistance now has a powerful new motive: migration control. This motive ought to be shaping US policy in the migration-sending countries near its borders: Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. So far the US has done little to address the causes—state failure, gang violence, and a stratospheric murder rate—that produce the ongoing surge of child migrants from these countries.

Instead of stabilizing failing societies before desperate refugees start arriving, the US reaction has been to make it harder for refugees to get in. The US accepts large numbers of immigrants as permanent residents (about a million a year) while throttling back the number of refugees. The admissions of refugees plummeted after September 11 and are only now recovering to about 70,000 annually. After the Paris attacks, security concerns may result in cutting back US refugee admissions still further, even when the facts suggest that the security concerns are manageable. According to the Migration Policy In-

stitute in Washington, since September 11 the US has taken in 784,000 refugees and of these only three have been arrested subsequently on terrorism-related charges.<sup>5</sup>

Fear makes for bad strategy. A better policy starts by remembering a better America. In January 1957, none other than Elvis Presley sang a gospel tune called “There Will Be Peace in the Valley” on *The Ed Sullivan Show* to encourage Americans to welcome and donate to Hungarian refugees. After the 1975 collapse of South Vietnam, President Ford ordered an interagency task force to resettle 130,000 Vietnamese refugees; and later Jimmy Carter found room in America for Vietnamese boat people. In 1999, in a single month, the US processed four thousand Kosovar refugees through Fort Dix, New Jersey.

grant countries to do their part. The strategic goal is to relieve the pressure on the three frontline states. Refugee resettlement by the US also acknowledges a fact that the refugees themselves are trying to tell us: even if peace eventually comes to their tormented country, there will be no life for all of them back home.

Once the US stops behaving like a bemused bystander, watching a neighbor trying to put out a fire, it can then put pressure on allies and adversaries to make up the shortfall in funding for refugee programs run by the UNHCR and the World Food Program. One of the drivers of the exodus this summer was a sudden reduction in refugee food aid caused by shortfalls in funding. Even now these agencies remain short of what they need to provide shelter and food to the people flooding out of Syria.

Now that ISIS has brought down a Russian aircraft over Sinai and bombed civilians in Paris, Beirut, and Ankara, the US needs to use its refugee policy to help stabilize its allies in the region. The presumption that it can sit out the refugee crisis makes a hugely unwise bet on the stability of Jordan, where refugees amount to 25 percent of the total population; and Lebanon, where largely Sunni refugees, who have hardly any camps, are already destabilizing the agonizingly fragile multiconfessional order; and Turkey, where the burdens of coping with nearly two million refugees are driving the increasingly authoritarian Erdoğan regime into the arms of Vladimir Putin.

It's time for the US to call the bluff of China and Russia, its fellow members of the Security Council, and remind them that if they want to be taken seriously as global leaders, they should pay their dues. The Chinese have done little or nothing for refugee relief in the Middle East, and the Russians are energetically creating more refugees with their bombing campaign while contributing a paltry \$300,000 to the UNHCR Syria appeal. As for the Saudis, the richest state in the region, they have contributed less than \$3 million.

A US strategy should start from the understanding that the refugees present a national security challenge as much as a humanitarian crisis and that helping Europe deal with them is critical to the battle against jihadi nihilism. If Europe closes its borders, if the frontline states can no longer cope, the US and the West will face millions of stateless people who will never forget that they were denied the right to have rights. In a battle against extremism, giving hope to desperate people is not charity: it is simple prudence. These national interests demand that a ceasefire in Syria become as important for the administration as the Iran deal.

There is no higher priority for the last year of Obama's presidency. Taking in 65,000 refugees supports the most generous of the Europeans—Germany and Sweden—and helps them shame the worst. Giving assistance to the frontline states—Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey—with their refugee burden helps to preserve what stability remains in the region and rebuts the presumption that the US has abandoned them. In a war against jihadi nihilism, in a world of collapsing states and civil war, a refugee policy that refuses to capitulate to fear belongs at the center of any American and European strategy. □

—November 18, 2015



# The ‘Mind as a Beautiful Miracle’

Garry Wills

**The Givenness of Things**  
by Marilynne Robinson.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
292 pp., \$26.00

## 1.

Marilynne Robinson, best known as a novelist (especially for her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gilead* of 2004), is also a scholar. She received her doctorate from the University of Washington in 1977, with a dissertation on Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part Two*. She now admits, wryly, that she would not gladly read that dissertation. She also said, when she turned seventy, that she had neglected Shakespeare for decades, but was boning up on him again. I don’t believe her. She clearly has been pondering the plays all her life. She thinks through Shakespeare. She does not try to draw meaning out of the plays, but brings her own intuitions to them for validation. Her novels have many indirect references to lines from Shakespeare, and the essays in her new collection, *The Givenness of Things*, discuss his works directly.

When, for instance, she reflects on the meaning of “servant,” she reminds us that Shakespeare’s troupe was known as the servants of the Lord Chamberlain and later of King James. In both capacities he and his fellow actors wore the livery of their “Lord.” No wonder Shakespeare shows a great awareness of the duties and privileges of servants of various kinds in the plays. The servants can be treacherous, loyal, or sycophantic. Some prove themselves a truer servant of their lord by disobeying him (like the disguised Kent disobeying Lear’s decree of banishment). Others carry out their lords’ evil directions (Antigonus exposing the baby Perdita in the wilderness).

One might expect that Robinson, when she considers the social conditions of Shakespeare’s time, might be joining the New Historicists, such as Stephen Greenblatt, but she gives them the back of her hand. She is always more interested in theology than in the social sciences. According to some of Robinson’s favorite authors, we are all servants to God, and that service is ennobled by the fact that Jesus came as a servant to us. John Wycliffe called Jesus “a servant God.” William Langland wrote that “Jesus is truly his [the poor man’s] servant (for He said so Himself) and wears the poor man’s livery. . . . Jesus bears the sign of poverty, and saved all mankind in that apparel.” Paradoxes of that kind are present in servants’ conflicting obligations throughout Shakespeare.

The importance of theology is even more pressing when Robinson brings one of her favorite themes to the plays—grace, by which she means giving more than one owes and receiving more than one deserves. She finds a very riot of such givings and receivings in Shakespeare’s “romances.” The agenda she perceived in these plays seems set by Posthumus in *Cymbeline*: he says, when Iachimo kneels to ask for forgiveness, “Kneel not to me; the power that I have on you is, to spare you.”

The importance to Robinson of grace lets her bring together “Shakespeare, my theologian” and “my particular saint, John Calvin.” She sees theology in Shakespeare and poetry in Calvin: “Shakespeare’s theological seriousness is simultaneous with his greatness as a dramatist.” And both men impress her by seeing the importance of grace.

Robinson’s conception of grace has had a real impact in our lives, marked by what I take to be President Obama’s greatest speech, his eulogy for the nine



Marilynne Robinson, Iowa City, 2005

people murdered in their church, the historic Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina. The speech is a profound meditation on grace, occasioned by the relatives of the slain who addressed the killer in open court and forgave him, asking God to have mercy on him. They did not give in to death but reknit their community for life by forgiveness. The president said:

That’s what I’ve felt this week—an open heart. That, more than any particular policy or analysis, is what’s called upon right now, I think—what a friend of mine, the writer Marilynne Robinson, calls “that reservoir of goodness, beyond, and of another kind, that we are able to do each other in the ordinary cause of things.”

There are not many political speeches in America that have any theological depth—William Jennings Bryan’s Cross of Gold speech, perhaps, or Lincoln’s Second Inaugural. That is the company the president’s eulogy has joined. Robinson can prompt such considerations. There are any number of places the president could have drawn from in her work—as when she has the Congregationalist pastor in her novel *Gilead* rebuke himself for not being forgiving enough: “The Lord stands waiting to take our enemies’ sins upon Himself. So it is a rejection of the reality of grace to hold our enemy at fault.”

The president emphasized again the importance of Robinson in his interview of her for this journal (November 5, 2015).

## 2.

Calvin

Robinson found this deep concept of grace in Calvin (of all people) by traveling toward him on a literary path.

daughter, who would become Elizabeth I, translated one of Marguerite’s religious works into English.

This approach to Calvin as a Renaissance humanist as well as a Reformer is far from our popular conception of him as a gloomy theorist of predestination, with a hard division between saints and the unsaved, in a dark world of sins and punishments. Robinson says that this picture is radically wrong. It neglects his belief in the human mind as a beautiful miracle that processes all the miracles of nature. She thinks he believed in predestination only in the sense that God foresees the future, not that he decrees it.

For Calvin, she argues, the doctrine of the Incarnation, of God becoming flesh, does not apply simply to Jesus. She sees God as entering matter from the beginning of creation. She has the concept of a Cosmic Christ that seems more like Teilhard de Chardin than the Calvin of popular reputation. Creation is an Incarnation; humankind is an Incarnation (we are made in the image of God):

If Christ was present at the Creation, and if existence was made with or through him, how is this manifest in Being as we know it? To put it another way, what do we fail to see or sense in Being if we exclude the role of [the Cosmic] Christ, the hypostatic [underlying reality of the] Person of Christ in the Divine Creator, in the making and sustaining of it [Being]? For me a high Christology [finding God in Jesus] implies a high anthropology [finding God in all humans].

Robinson, with her sense of the miraculousness of all being, is dismissive (sometimes too dismissive) of much of science—of reductive Darwinism, Freudianism, or biblical form criticism—claiming that they take us away from our immediate experience, our taste of the human, our separate identities. Unfortunately, she does not recognize that many people use these scientific tools without treating them as exclusive of other considerations. She says, for instance, that neuroscientists who can chart how fear lights up one part of the brain go on to imply (when they do not assert) that fear is just a local spasm of the nerves rather than a function of the whole human person. What one fears, and to what degree, is deeply different for people who fear mice or the End Times, math tests or terrorists. Yet I know of neuroscientists who are not simply reductive. Not all Darwinians are social Darwinians. Not all biblical critics are unbelievers.

But in effect she is saying to hasty rationalists, “Don’t understand me too soon—be puzzled by me, as I am puzzled by me.” To quote again the pastor in *Gilead*:

In every important way we are such secrets from each other, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate



jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our own variant notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable—which, I hasten to add, we generally do not satisfy and by which we struggle to live.

Robinson is right to treasure what she calls the givenness of things. There are epiphanies to be found in the everyday. She would agree with G.K. Chesterton, who said that no one can deserve a sunset or earn a rose. To quote again her fictional pastor, “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.” Given this attitude, we rightly expect her to be a great nature writer, and she does not disappoint. She can put effects of light and water into words. Her description of the iris is something Ruskin could be proud of. She finds even in tiny plants and insects a “squandered intricacy,” with “a small grandeur of form.”

Her doctrine of “givenness” makes her a special kind of fundamentalist. She shudders at the thought of being lumped with right-wing fundamentalists:

To my utter chagrin, at this moment in America it can be taken to mean that I look favorably on the death penalty, that I object to food stamps or Medicaid, that I expect marriage equality to unknit the social fabric and bring down wrath, even that I believe Christianity itself to be imperiled by a sinister media cabal.

Her biblical “givenness” takes the Bible—both Old Testament and New—as something to be accepted, not as literal truth but as a set of attempts at understanding God. She does not sort texts out in terms of their source, form, or scientific validity. If there are four different accounts of the Resurrection of Jesus, she savors them all because “by the time they were written down, they were the cherished possession of the early church and had taken forms many had already found to be persuasive, and also beautiful and moving.”

Because Robinson treasures Calvin’s theology, she joined his church: “I have shifted allegiances the doctrinal and demographic inch that separates Presbyterians from Congregationalists.” Or as she puts it elsewhere, “I adopted myself into Congregationalism on the basis of affinity, as most of its present members have done.” She now delivers the homily at her church when the pastor wants her to (lucky congregation!). Some of the material in this collection and in her earlier collection of essays, *The Death of Adam*, clearly comes from her sermons. Yet she could not be farther from the “preachy,” as her four novels prove.

### 3.

#### Gilead

Three of her four novels trace four generations in a fictional Iowa town, Gilead, founded in the 1850s by Protestant abolitionists. Gilead is modeled on a real town with another biblical name, Tabor. She amuses herself at

one point by making some people in Gilead, her fictional town, visit the real town, Tabor, which is its model. Robinson admires a founding generation of Calvinist reformers on the frontier. She describes in an essay

the settlement of the Midwest, a region that became a bulwark against the spread of the slave economy. Strikingly and crucially, it scattered a number of fine little colleges along the frontier, among them Knox, Grinnell, Central, Carleton, and Oberlin, all of them centers of abolitionism, stations on the Underground Railroad.

She describes those Iowa towns without idealizing them. (They were founded to keep out Roman Catholics as well as slaves.) A comic memory of the founding generation in the novel *Gilead* is of a tunnel dug to hide runaway slaves. When a horse crashes down through the surface dirt into the tunnel, they do not know how to extricate it, or how to hide the tunnel again. Burrowing to get the horse out, they so honeycomb the site that they have to move the whole town to a new location. Meanwhile, the one slave who was in town when the horse incident occurred runs away from his would-be rescuers, frightened by their incompetence.

The characters in the three novels describe the same events in the same time period (the 1950s). But this is no *Rashomon*, where people give mainly exculpatory accounts of the same event. Robinson’s characters are self-inculpatory, unable to understand other people (or themselves). She is exemplifying what she has one man say—that we are mysteries to each other, inhabitants of different civilizations. The characters, mainly Congregationalist or Presbyterian, have different politics—some supporting Eisenhower, others Stevenson—but there is no emphasis on politics. One could even think, from the novels’ evidence, that she is not interested in her characters’ political views. But there is no doubt where her political sympathies lie in her nonfiction writing.

### 4.

#### Politics

Sometimes, in her later essays, one has to look carefully to get her political references, since she usually talks in generalities, and the essays bear single-name titles like “Servanthood” or “Grace.” There was no such restraint in her first nonfiction book, *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State and Nuclear Pollution* (1989). In 1983, she spent a sabbatical year in England, perhaps to focus on literary matters (like Shakespeare performances). But that year there was a scare that closed beaches in the Lake District (breeding ground of British Romanticism).

She saw from the newspapers that the closure was caused by a project in Sellafield, the major producer of plutonium for the British hydrogen bomb. She began doing her homework on this combined government-business operation with a terrible record of leaks, loose storage, and disposal practices that was endangering a previously idyllic part of England. Her anger mounted so that, back in America, she wrote a scathing attack on the whole project.

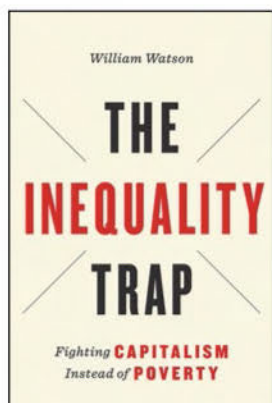
She did not limit herself to a study of England’s nuclear program, but went after the entire British way of governing. She found that British critics of their political system—people considered radical in their day (Carlyle, the Webbs, Shaw, Orwell)—were complicit with the status quo in roundabout ways. Those writers “criticize in such a way as to reinforce the system which is supposedly being criticized.” The one critic of England’s political arrangements that she considered basically right was the one writing in and observing from the British Museum, Karl Marx. So, just as she is a Calvinist with a difference, a biblical fundamentalist with a difference, she is also a Marxist with a difference. For one thing, unlike many of Marx’s admirers and almost all his opponents, she has actually read Marx. She says that a caricature often substitutes for the real man. For instance, he is presented as the opposite of Adam Smith, though in fact they often agree in their analysis and recommendations. Both, for instance, argued that higher wages increase productivity (a point ignored by modern Republican free-marketers, and by Margaret Thatcher in the England of 1983).

In the essays for her new collection, she writes less polemically than in her Sellafield book—in fact, her attention is not mainly directed to contemporary politics. But every now and then, lightning darts down from those Olympian heights, with flashes of her old fighting attitude. In an essay titled “Value,” for instance, she can describe the current state of our politics without limiting herself to any named member of the Koch family:

There are old men now who spend their twilight using imponderable wealth to overwhelm the political system. I am sure this is more exciting than keeping a stable of racehorses, or buying that fourth yacht. After a certain point there isn’t much of real interest that can be done with yet more money. But imagine how great a boost to the aging ego would come with taking a nation’s fate out of its own unworthy hands and shaping it to one’s particular lights.

I think we better pay attention to these essays. When, after all, will we get another Marxist Calvinist who writes prize-winning novels and preaches in her church? Every element in that combination enriches the rest. Lucky us. □

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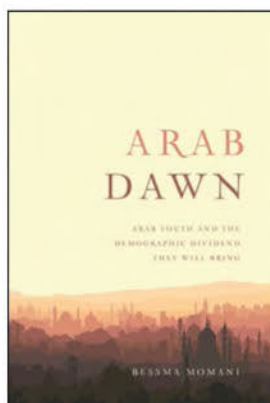


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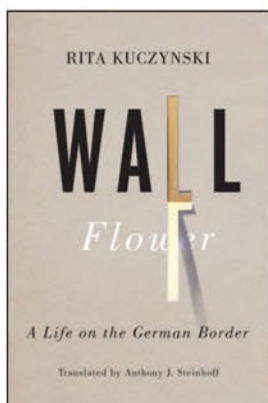


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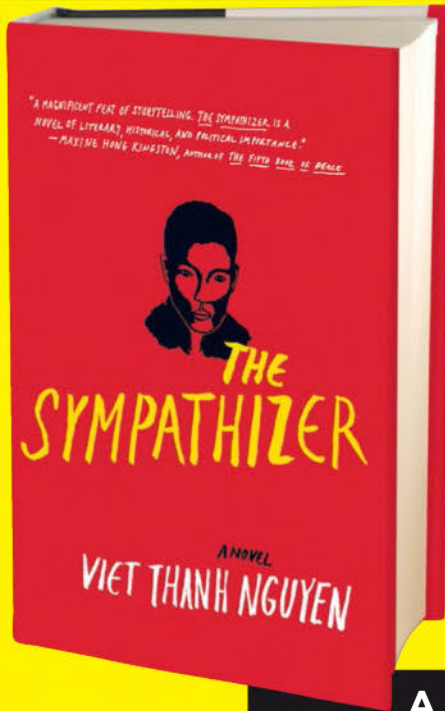
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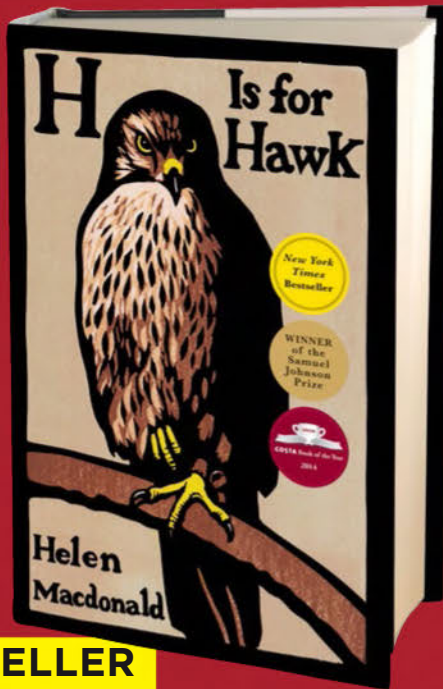
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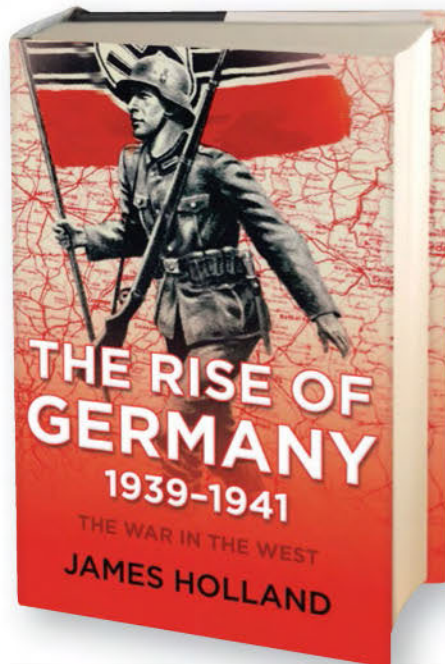
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# Challenging the Oligarchy

Paul Krugman

## **Saving Capitalism: For the Many, Not the Few**

by Robert B. Reich.  
Knopf, 279 pp., \$26.95

Back in 1991, in what now seems like a far more innocent time, Robert Reich published an influential book titled *The Work of Nations*, which among other things helped land him a cabinet post in the Clinton administration. It was a good book for its time—but time has moved on. And the gap between that relatively sunny take and Reich's latest, *Saving Capitalism*, is itself an indicator of the unpleasant ways America has changed.

*The Work of Nations* was in some ways a groundbreaking work, because it focused squarely on the issue of rising inequality—an issue some economists, myself included, were already taking seriously, but that was not yet central to political discourse. Reich's book saw inequality largely as a technical problem, with a technocratic, win-win solution. That was then. These days, Reich offers a much darker vision, and what is in effect a call for class war—or if you like, for an uprising of workers against the quiet class war that America's oligarchy has been waging for decades.

## 1.

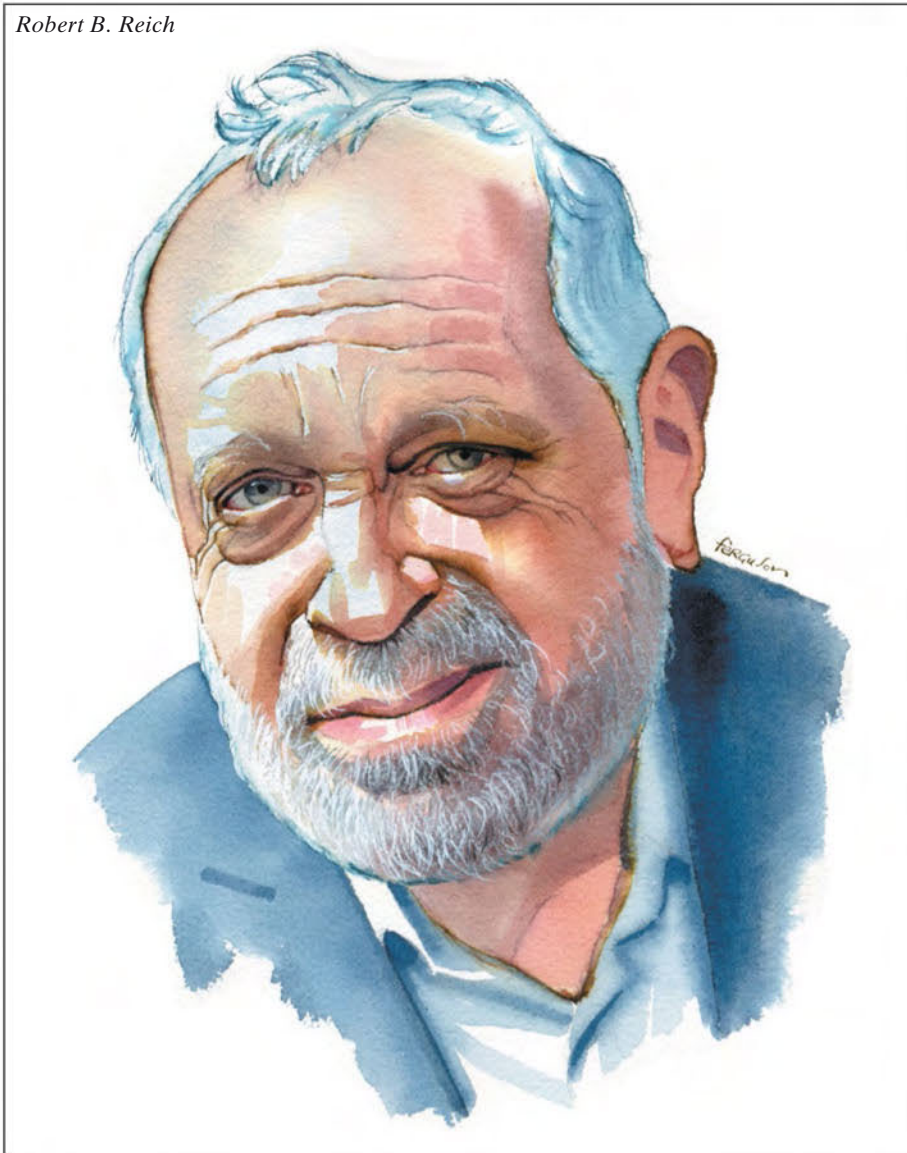
To understand the difference between *The Work of Nations* and *Saving Capitalism*, you need to know about two things. One, which is familiar to most of us, is the increasingly ugly turn taken by American politics, which I'll be discussing later. The other is more of an insider debate, but one with huge implications for policy and politics alike: the rise and fall of the theory of skill-biased technological change, which was once so widely accepted among economists that it was frequently referred to simply as SBTC.

The starting point for SBTC was the observation that, around 1980, wages of college graduates began rising much more rapidly than wages of Americans with only a high school degree or less. Why?

One possibility was the growth of international trade, with rising imports of labor-intensive manufactured goods from low-wage countries. Such imports could, in principle, cause not just rising inequality but an actual decline in the wages of less-educated workers; the standard theory of international trade that supports such a principle is actually a lot less benign in its implications than many noneconomists imagine. But the numbers didn't seem to work. Around 1990, trade with developing countries was still too small to explain the big movements in relative wages of college and high school graduates that had already happened. Furthermore, trade should have produced a shift in employment toward more skill-intensive industries; it couldn't explain what we actually saw, which was a rise in the level of skills within industries, extending across pretty much the entire economy.

Many economists therefore turned to a different explanation: it was all

Robert B. Reich



about technology, and in particular the information technology revolution. Modern technology, or so it was claimed, reduced the need for routine manual labor while increasing the demand for conceptual work. And while the average education level was rising, it wasn't rising fast enough to keep up with this technological shift. Hence the rise of the earnings of the college-educated and the relative, and perhaps absolute, decline in earnings for those without the right skills.

This view was never grounded in direct evidence that technology was the driving force behind wage changes; the technology factor was only inferred from its assumed effects. But it was expressed in a number of technical papers brandishing equations and data, and was codified in particular in a widely cited 1992 paper by Lawrence F. Katz of Harvard and Kevin M. Murphy of the University of Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Reich's *The Work of Nations* was, in part, a popularization of SBTC, using vivid language to connect abstract economic formalism to commonplace observation. In Reich's vision, technology was eliminating routine work, and even replacing some jobs that historically required face-to-face interaction. But it was opening new opportunities for "symbolic analysts"—people with the talent and, crucially, the training to work with ideas. Reich's solution to growing inequality was to equip more

people with that necessary training, both through an expansion of conventional education and through retraining later in life.

It was an attractive, optimistic vision; you can see why it received such a favorable reception. But while one still encounters people invoking skill-biased technological change as an explanation of rising inequality and lagging wages—it's especially popular among moderate Republicans in denial about what's happened to their party and among "third way" types lamenting the rise of Democratic populism—the truth is that SBTC has fared very badly over the past quarter-century, to the point where it no longer deserves to be taken seriously as an account of what ails us.

The story fell apart in stages.<sup>2</sup> First, over the course of the 1990s the skill gap stopped growing at the bottom of the scale: real wages of workers near the middle stopped outpacing those near the bottom, and even began to fall a bit behind. Some economists responded by revising the theory, claiming that technology was hollowing out the middle rather than displacing the bottom. But this had the feel of an epicycle added to a troubled theory—and after about 2000 the real wages of college graduates stopped rising as

well. Meanwhile, incomes at the very top—the one percent, and even more so a very tiny group within the one percent—continued to soar. And this divergence evidently had little to do with education, since hedge fund managers and high school teachers have similar levels of formal training.

Something else began happening after 2000: labor in general began losing ground relative to capital. After decades of stability, the share of national income going to employee compensation began dropping fairly fast. One could try to explain this, too, with technology—maybe robots were displacing all workers, not just the less educated. But this story ran into multiple problems. For one thing, if we were experiencing a robot-driven technological revolution, why did productivity growth seem to be slowing, not accelerating? For another, if it was getting easier to replace workers with machines, we should have seen a rise in business investment as corporations raced to take advantage of the new opportunities; we didn't, and in fact corporations have increasingly been parking their profits in banks or using them to buy back stocks.

In short, a technological account of rising inequality is looking ever less plausible, and the notion that increasing workers' skills can reverse the trend is looking less plausible still. But in that case, what is going on?

## 2.

Economists struggling to make sense of economic polarization are, increasingly, talking not about technology but about power. This may sound like straying off the reservation—aren't economists supposed to focus only on the invisible hand of the market?—but there is actually a long tradition of economic concern about "market power," aka the effect of monopoly. True, such concerns were deemphasized for several generations, but they're making a comeback—and one way to read Robert Reich's new book is in part as a popularization of the new view, just as *The Work of Nations* was in part a popularization of SBTC. There's more to Reich's thesis, as I'll explain shortly. But let's start with the material that economists will find easiest to agree with.

Market power has a precise definition: it's what happens whenever individual economic actors are able to affect the prices they receive or pay, as opposed to facing prices determined anonymously by the invisible hand. Monopolists get to set the price of their product; monopsonists—sole purchasers in a market—get to set the price of things they buy. Oligopoly, where there are a few sellers, is more complicated than monopoly, but also involves substantial market power. And here's the thing: it's obvious to the naked eye that our economy consists much more of monopolies and oligopolists than it does of the atomistic, price-taking competitors economists often envision.

But how much does that matter? Milton Friedman, in a deeply influential 1953 essay, argued that monopoly mattered only to the extent that actual

<sup>1</sup>"Changes in Relative Wages, 1963–1987: Supply and Demand Factors," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (February 1992).

<sup>2</sup>A good overview of the decline of SBTC is Lawrence Mishel, Heidi Shierholz, and John Schmitt, "Don't Blame the Robots: Assessing the Job Polarization Explanation of Growing Wage Inequality," EPI-CEPR working paper, November 2013.





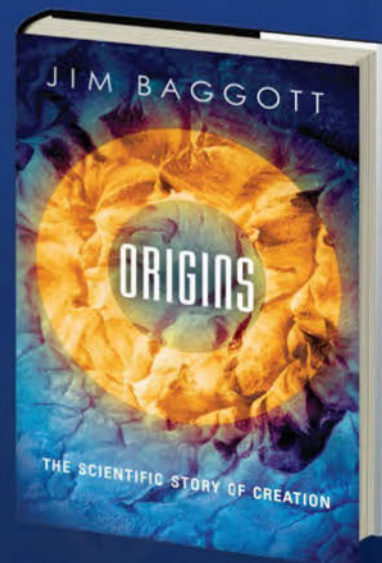
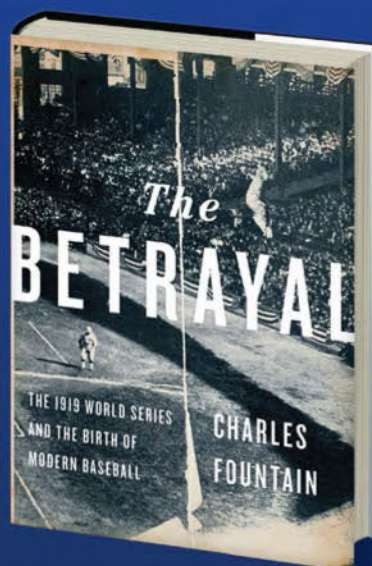
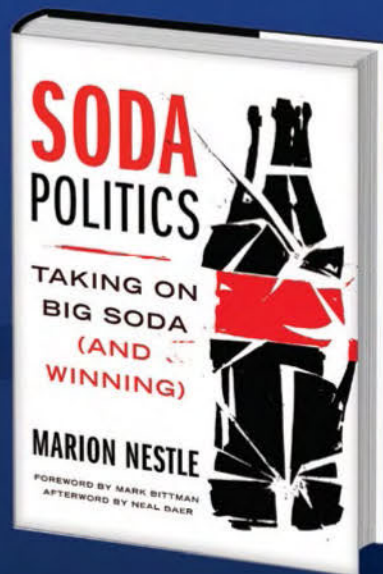
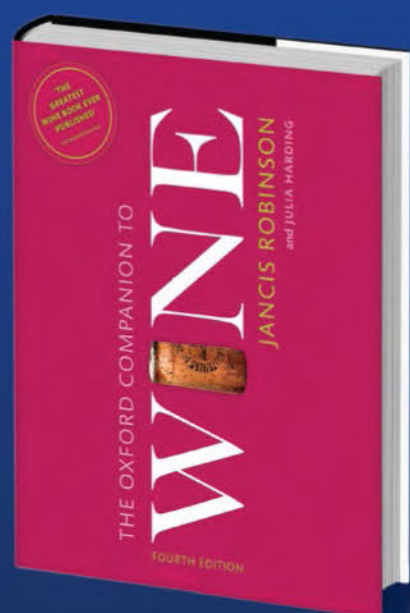
DIANE ARBUS *SUSAN SONTAG ALONE ON A BED. N.Y.C. 1965*

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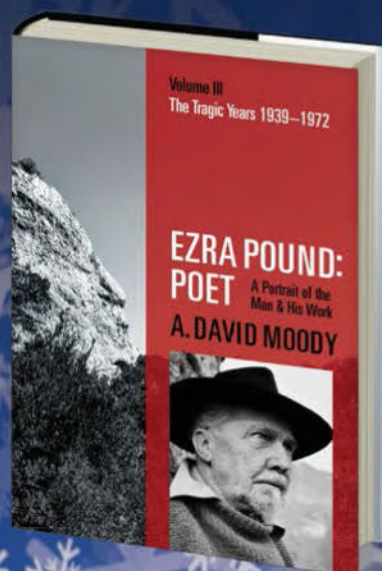
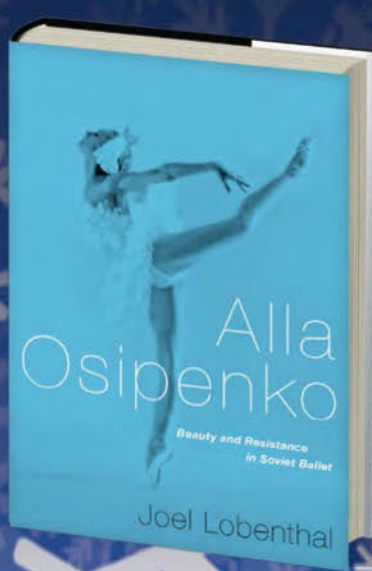
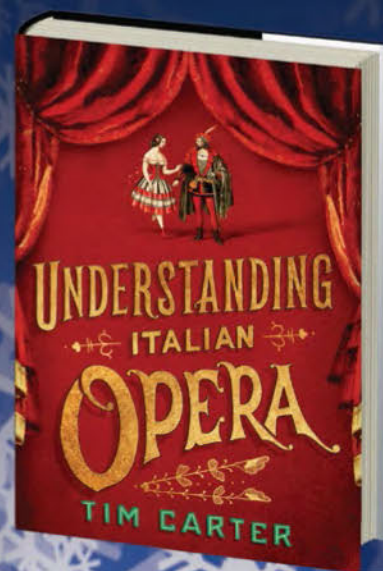
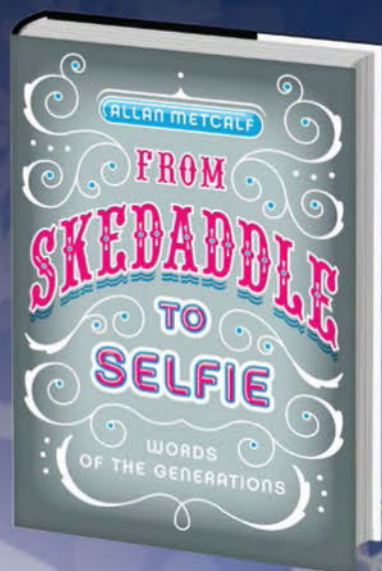
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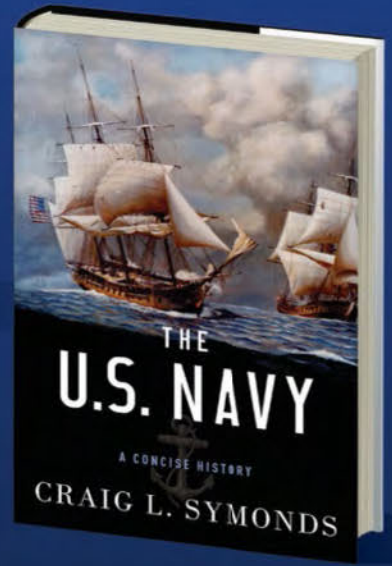
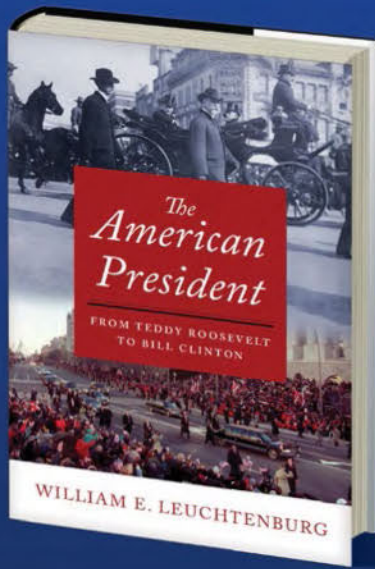
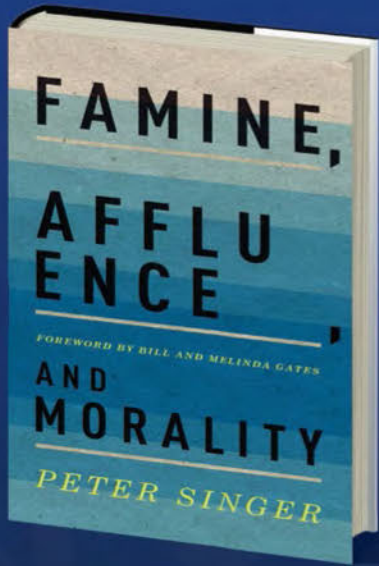
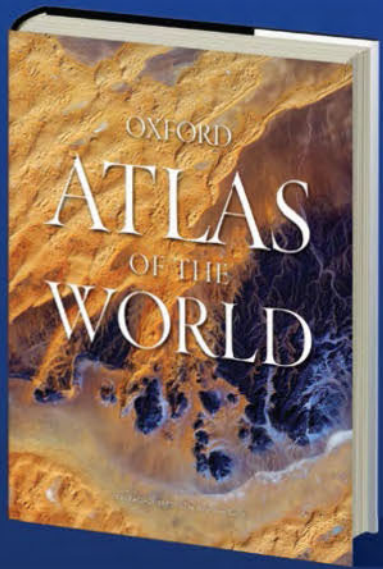




# GIVE THE GIFT O



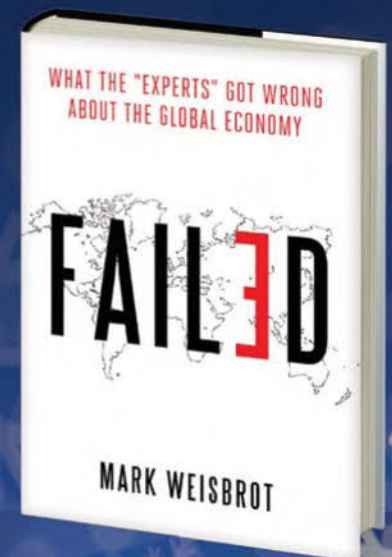
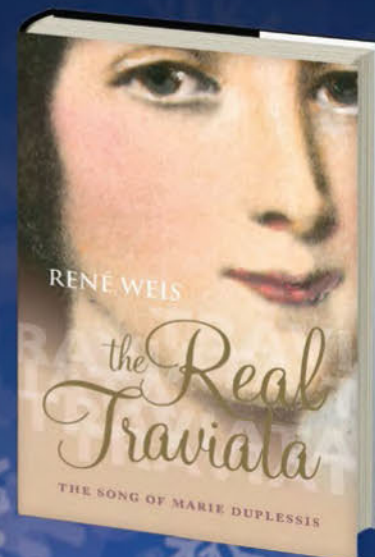
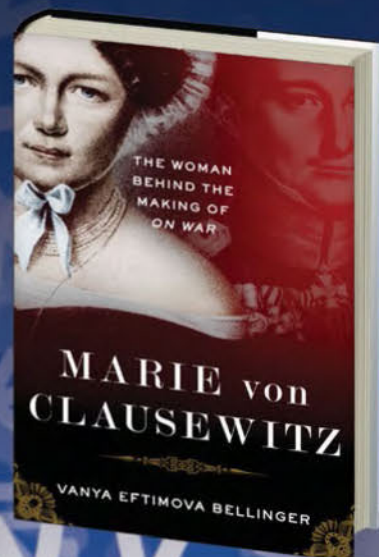
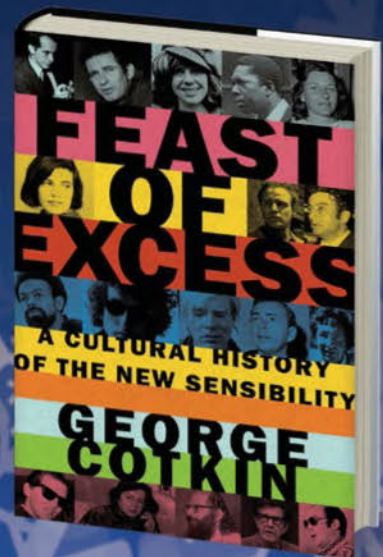




# F WORDS

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market behavior differed from the predictions of simple supply-and-demand analysis—and that in fact there was little evidence that monopoly had important effects.<sup>3</sup> Friedman's view largely prevailed within the economics profession, and de facto in the wider political discussion. While monopoly never vanished from the textbooks, and antitrust laws remained part of the policy arsenal, both have faded in influence since the 1950s.

It's increasingly clear, however, that this was both an intellectual and a policy error. There's growing evidence that market power does indeed have large implications for economic behavior—and that the failure to pursue antitrust regulation vigorously has been a major reason for the disturbing trends in the economy.

Reich illustrates the role of monopoly with well-chosen examples, starting with the case of broadband. As he notes, most Americans seeking Internet access are more or less at the mercy of their local cable company; the result is that broadband is both slower and far more expensive in the US than in other countries. Another striking example involves agriculture, usually considered the very model of a perfectly competitive sector. As he notes, a single company, Monsanto, now dominates much of the sector as the sole supplier of genetically modified soybeans and corn. A recent article in *The American Prospect* points out that other examples of such dominance are easy to find, ranging from sunglasses to syringes to cat food.<sup>4</sup>

There's also statistical evidence for a rising role of monopoly power. Recent work by Jason Furman, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, and Peter Orszag, former head of the Office of Management and Budget, shows a rising number of firms earning "super-normal" returns—that is, they have persistently high profit rates that don't seem to be diminished by competition.<sup>5</sup>

Other evidence points indirectly to a strong role of market power. At this point, for example, there is an extensive empirical literature on the effects of changes in the minimum wage. Conventional supply-and-demand analysis says that raising the minimum wage should reduce employment, but as Reich notes, we now have a number of what amount to controlled experiments, in which employment in counties whose states have hiked the minimum wage can be compared with employment in neighboring counties across the state line. And there is no hint in the data of the supposed negative employment effect.

Why not? One leading hypothesis is that firms employing low-wage workers—such as fast-food chains—have significant monopsony power in the labor market; that is, they are the principle purchasers of low-wage labor in a particular job market. And a monopsonist facing a price floor doesn't necessarily buy less, just as a monopolist

facing a price ceiling doesn't necessarily sell less and may sell more.

Suppose that we hypothesize that rising market power, rather than the ineluctable logic of modern technology, is driving the rise in inequality. How does this help make sense of what we see?

Part of the answer is that it resolves some of the puzzles posed by other accounts. Notably, it explains why high profits aren't spurring high investment. Consider those monopolies controlling local Internet service: their high profits don't act as an incentive to invest in faster connections—on the contrary, they have less incentive to improve service than they would if they faced more competition and earned lower profits. Extend this logic to the economy as a whole, and the combination of a rising profit share and weak investment starts to make sense.

Furthermore, focusing on market power helps explain why the big turn toward income inequality seems to coincide with political shifts, in particular the sharp right turn in American politics. For the extent to which corporations are able to exercise market power is, in large part, determined by political decisions. And this ties the issue of market power to that of political power.

### 3.

Robert Reich has never shied away from big ambitions. The title of *The Work of Nations* deliberately alluded to Adam Smith; Reich clearly hoped that readers would see his work not simply as a useful guide but as a foundational text. *Saving Capitalism* is, if anything, even more ambitious despite its compact length. Reich attempts to cast his new discussion of inequality as a fundamental rethinking of market economics. He is not, he insists, calling for policies that will limit and soften the functioning of markets; rather, he says that the very definition of free markets is a political decision, and that we could run things very differently. "Government doesn't 'intrude' on the 'free market.' It creates the market."

To be honest, I have mixed feelings about this sales pitch. In some ways it seems to concede too much, accepting the orthodoxy that free markets are good even while calling for major changes in policy. And I also worry that the attempt to squeeze everything into a grand intellectual scheme may distract from the prosaic but important policy actions that Reich (and I) support.

Whatever one thinks of the packaging, however, Reich makes a very good case that widening inequality largely reflects political decisions that could have gone in very different directions. The rise in market power reflects a turn away from antitrust laws that looks less and less justified by outcomes, and in some cases the rise in market power is the result of the raw exercise of political clout to prevent policies that would limit monopolies—for example, the sustained and successful campaign to prevent public provision of Internet access.

Similarly, when we look at the extraordinary incomes accruing to a few people in the financial sector, we need to realize that there are real questions about whether those incomes are "earned." As Reich argues, there's good reason to believe that high profits

at some financial firms largely reflect insider trading that we've made a political decision not to regulate effectively. And we also need to realize that the growth of finance reflected political decisions that deregulated banking and failed to regulate newer financial activities.

Meanwhile, forms of market power that benefit large numbers of workers as opposed to small numbers of plutocrats have declined, again thanks in large part to political decisions. We tend to think of the drastic decline in unions as an inevitable consequence of technological change and globalization, but one need look no further than Canada to see that this isn't true. Once upon a time, around a third of workers in both the US and Canada were union members; today, US unionization is



Jeb Bush, Donald Trump, Ben Carson, and Ted Cruz at the Republican presidential debate in Milwaukee, November 2015

down to 11 percent, while it's still 27 percent north of the border. The difference was politics: US policy turned hostile toward unions in the 1980s, while Canadian policy didn't follow suit. And the decline in unions seems to have major impacts beyond the direct effect on members' wages: researchers at the International Monetary Fund have found a close association between falling unionization and a rising share of income going to the top one percent, suggesting that a strong union movement helps limit the forces causing high concentration of income at the top.<sup>6</sup>

Following his schema, Reich argues that unions aren't so much a source of market power as an example of "countervailing power" (a term he borrows from John Kenneth Galbraith) that limits the depredations of monopolists and others. If unions are not subject to restrictions, they may do so by collective bargaining not only for wages but for working conditions. In any case, the causes and consequences of union decline, like the causes and consequences of rising monopoly power, are a very good illustration of the role of politics in increasing inequality.

But why has politics gone in this direction? Like a number of other commentators, Reich argues that there's a feedback loop between political and market power. Rising wealth at the top buys growing political influence, via campaign contributions, lobbying, and the rewards of the revolving door. Political influence in turn is used to rewrite the rules of the game—antitrust

<sup>6</sup>Florence Jaumotte and Carolina Osorio Buitron, "Union Power and Inequality," [www.voxeu.org](http://www.voxeu.org), October 22, 2015.

laws, deregulation, changes in contract law, union-busting—in a way that reinforces income concentration. The result is a sort of spiral, a vicious circle of oligarchy. That, Reich suggests, is the story of America over the past generation. And I'm afraid that he's right. So what can turn it around?

### 4.

Anyone hoping for a reversal of the spiral of inequality has to answer two questions. First, what policies do you think would do the trick? Second, how would you get the political power to make those policies happen? I don't think it's unfair to Robert Reich to say that *Saving Capitalism* offers only a sketch of an answer to either question.

In his proposals for new policies, Reich calls for a sort of broad portfolio, or maybe a market basket, of changes aimed mainly at "predistribution"—changing the allocation of market income—rather than redistribution. (In Reich's view, this is seen as altering the predistribution that takes place under current rules.) These changes would include fairly standard liberal ideas like raising the minimum wage, reversing the anti-union bias of labor law and its enforcement, and changing contract law to empower workers to take action against employers and debtors to assert their interests against creditors. Reich would also, in a less orthodox move, seek legislative and other changes that might move corporations back toward what they were a half-century ago: organizations that saw themselves as answering not just to stockholders but to a broader set of "stakeholders," including workers and customers.

Would such measures be enough? Individually, none of them sounds up to the task. But the experience of the New Deal, which was remarkably successful at creating a middle-class nation—and for that matter the success of the de facto anti-New Deal that has prevailed since the 1970s at creating an oligarchy—suggest that there might be synergistic effects from a program containing all these elements. It's certainly worth trying.

But how is this supposed to happen politically? Reich professes optimism, citing the growing tendency of politicians in both parties to adopt populist rhetoric. For example, Ted Cruz has criticized the "rich and powerful, those who walk the corridors of power." But Reich concedes that "the sincerity behind these statements might be questioned." Indeed, Cruz has proposed large tax cuts that would force large cuts in social spending—and those tax cuts would deliver around 60 percent of their gains to the top one percent of the income distribution. He is definitely not putting his money—or, rather, your money—where his mouth is.

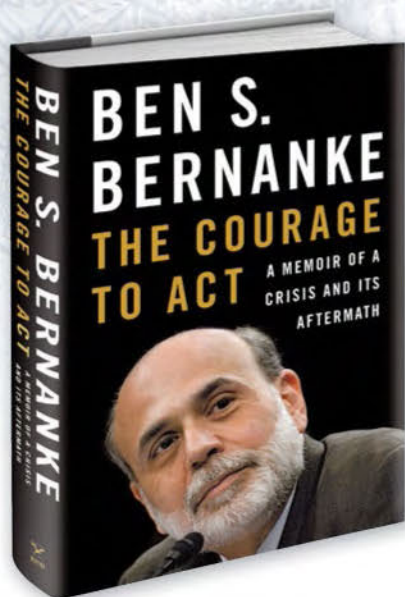
Still, Reich argues that the insincerity doesn't matter, because the very fact that people like Cruz feel the need to say such things indicates a sea change in public opinion. And this change in public opinion, he suggests, will eventually lead to the kind of political change that he, justifiably, seeks. We can only hope he's right. In the meantime, *Saving Capitalism* is a very good guide to the state we're in. □

<sup>3</sup>"The Methodology of Positive Economics," in *Essays in Positive Economics* (University of Chicago Press, 1953).

<sup>4</sup>David Dayen, "Bring Back Antitrust," Fall 2015.

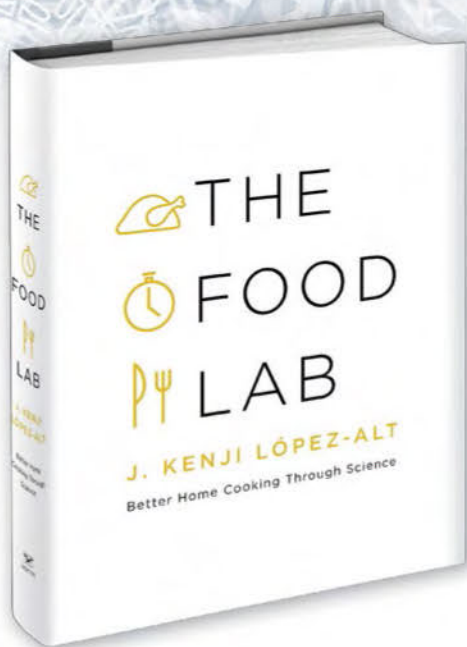
<sup>5</sup>Jason Furman and Peter Orszag, "A Firm-Level Perspective on the Role of Rents in the Rise of Inequality," October 2015, available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).





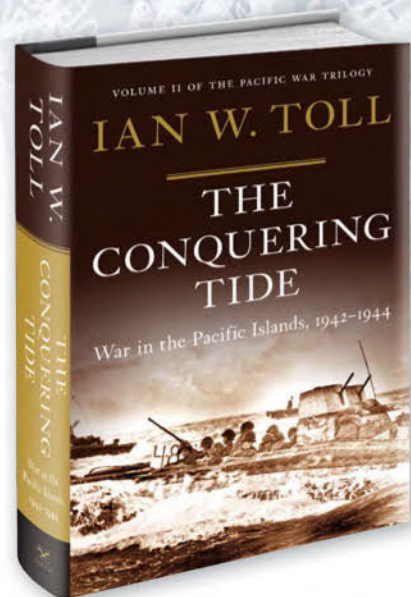
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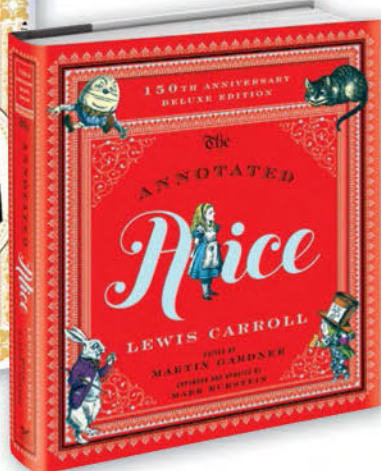
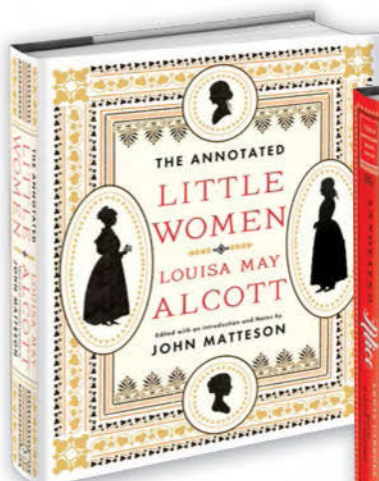


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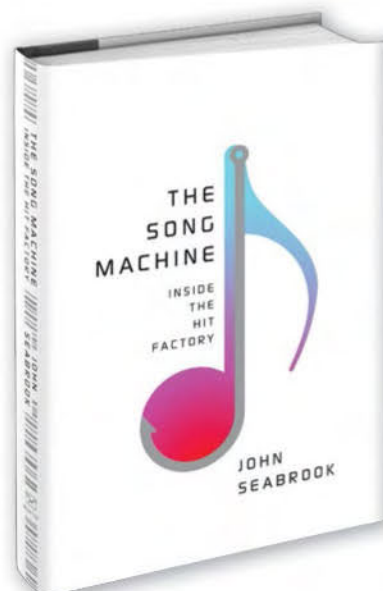
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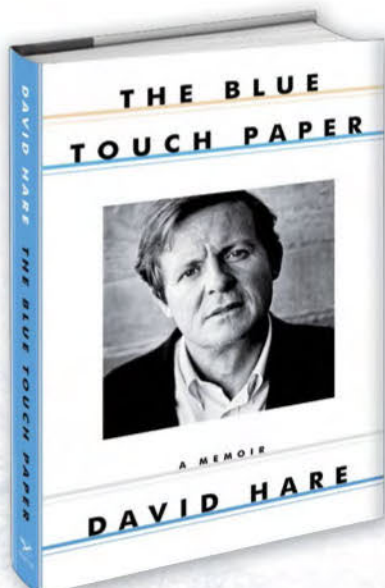
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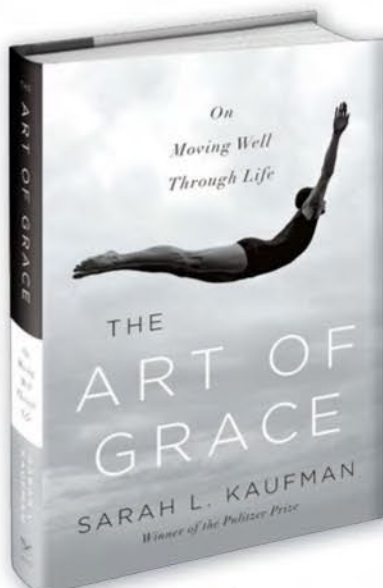
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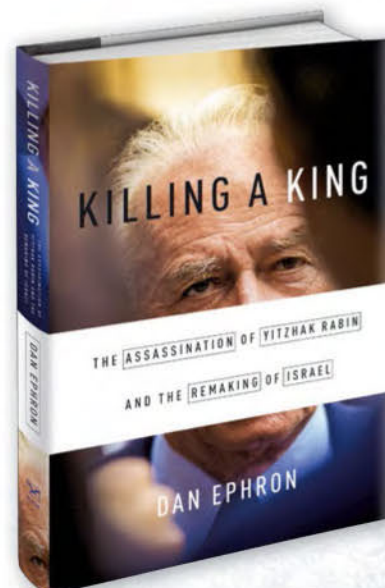
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# Sublime, Exhilarating del Sarto

Ingrid D. Rowland

## Andrea del Sarto:

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Faced with a choice between advancing his career abroad—in Paris, no less—and returning home, the Florentine painter Andrea del Sarto chose to come home, a choice for which his ambitious student Giorgio Vasari never quite forgave him. Vasari's capsule description of his master in his *Lives of the Artists* is as sharply critical as it is memorable:

And now we come to Andrea del Sarto, in whom nature and art revealed all that painting can accomplish in a single person through draftsmanship, color, and invention, so much so that if Andrea had been a man of a slightly more courageous and daring spirit (for he was profound in his talent and judgment), he would undoubtedly have had no equals.

But a certain timidity of spirit and a certain retiring simplicity of his nature never allowed him to develop a certain lively ardor, or that confidence which, added to all his other gifts, would have made him truly divine as a painter. For this reason he lacked the elaboration, grandeur, and versatility of style that can be seen in others. His figures, though simple and pure, are nonetheless well conceived, free from error, and supremely perfect in every respect.

This carefully crafted account comes from the second edition of the *Lives*, published in 1568. At fifty-seven, Vasari had become an illustrious teacher in his own right, the founder of a pioneering state-sponsored art school, the Florentine Academy and Company of the Arts of Drawing (Accademia e Compagnia delle Arti del Disegno), as well as the preferred artist and architect for two competing heads of state, the Grand Duke of Tuscany and the pope. A man of such enormous influence had good reason to temper his words.

Twenty years earlier, a leaner, hungrier Vasari had written about Andrea at far greater length and with blistering intimacy. Nervous, struggling, and in debt, the neophyte writer had staked his career on the idea that people might want to read the biographies of artists, and hence for the inaugural edition of the *Lives*, published in 1550, Andrea del Sarto came wrapped in a cloud of gossip:

The most excellent painter Andrea del Sarto, more excellent in his life than in his art, was deeply obliged to nature because of a rare talent in painting. If he had



Andrea del Sarto: Study for the Head of Saint Joseph, circa 1526–1527

devoted himself to a more civil and respectable life and not neglected himself and his neighbors for his craving for a woman who always kept him poor and lowly, he would have stayed in France, where he was summoned by that King [François I] who adored his work and esteemed him greatly, and would have rewarded him on a grand scale. Instead, to satisfy his own appetite and hers, he returned home and always lived in a lowly manner, and was never paid more than poorly for his work, while she, whom he regarded as his only good, finally abandoned him as he lay dying.

The bitterness of this passage is the bitterness of personal experience. Like Andrea's other apprentices and assistants, Vasari lived in the master's house (which is still standing today, at the corner of Via Giuseppe Giusti and Via Gino Capponi), experiencing both Lucrezia's physical beauty and her volatile character. The first edition of the *Lives* complains:

And although [Andrea's] assistants put up with the situation in order to learn something in his company, no one, great or small, got away without some malicious word or deed from her.

Vasari lived and worked for many years in Florence, but he was not a Florentine himself; for him, home was Arezzo, another Tuscan city. If his artistic world had a center at all, it was probably Rome. But a native Florentine like Andrea del Sarto can be excused for putting Paris behind him in 1519: like many of his contemporaries, he regarded his own city as the artistic capital of the world. It was precisely his return from France, moreover, that enabled Andrea and his pupils, numerous and talented, to forge an entirely new artistic style for the new Medici rulers of a new, modern Florentine state.

For generations, drawing—*disegno*—had been the activity that best defined Florentine art. Long before they were allowed to apply color, apprentice art-

ists were expected to hone their skills at drawing everything around them, from nature to people to works of art and architecture. Michelangelo's advice to one member of his workshop was typical: "Draw, Antonio, draw, Antonio, draw and don't waste time." He himself spent long hours in the garden of Palazzo Medici sketching works of ancient sculpture before he began to learn how to hew costly blocks of marble, just as his elder contemporary Leonardo would draw endless plans on paper before he began to paint or build. Goldsmiths drew, embroiderers drew, architects drew, and thanks to a solid background in drawing a master in one medium could become a master in others. Filippo Brunelleschi turned his talents from the miniature scale of gold jewelry to the gigantic dome of Florence Cathedral, Michelangelo turned from his marble *David* to the frescoed ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and Raphael revealed a skill for architecture that equaled his command of paint. They were all trained in Florence.

Normally, drawings were only the means to an end, tools to be thrown away when they had served their purpose. Cartoons, the paper mockups for paintings, were particularly vulnerable. Pricked with holes or scored with a sharp point, they were often destroyed when their essential lines were transferred to a wall or wooden panel. Sculptors who drew their designs on a block of wood or stone inevitably hacked their *disegno* away in the act of carving.

Paper, moreover, was expensive (and as durable as it was costly). Drawing sheets were pressed into service over and over again. On occasion, artists and architects would use more elaborate, finished drawings to present the projected design of a painting, sculpture, or building to a potential patron, and sometimes these presentation drawings were exhibited or passed around as artworks in their own right, as when Leonardo, perennially behind schedule, displayed his cartoons in public. Michelangelo sometimes supplied drawings to his friends for enjoyment and to his pupils for use in their own creations. In general, however, drawings were as likely to be discarded as kept. At the very least, the sheet of paper would be reused for more drawings until there was no room left on it.

In part because of his connection with Michelangelo, and in part because of his own ravenous curiosity, Giorgio Vasari was one of the first collectors to value drawings as legitimate works of art. He had taken to studying old master drawings as an aspiring artist, and when he gathered information about colleagues as an aspiring biographer for his *Lives*, he also sought out their drawings, binding them into a series of books. The books, unfortunately, have been lost, though isolated pieces survive.

One leaf from Vasari's vanished collection, a pensive *Study for the Head of Saint Joseph*, is now on display at the Frick Collection in New York, part of a comprehensive traveling exhibition of the exquisite drawings

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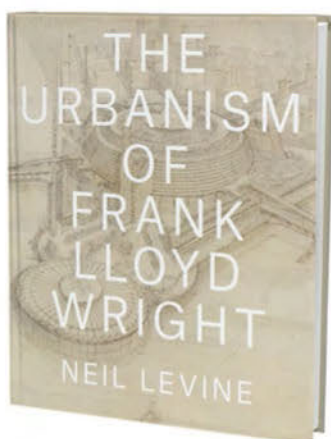
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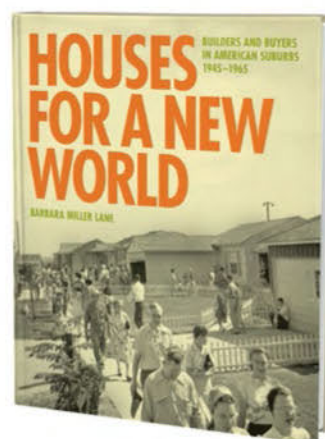
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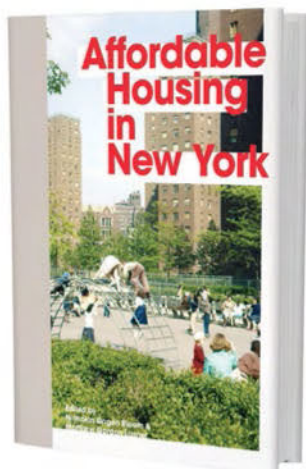
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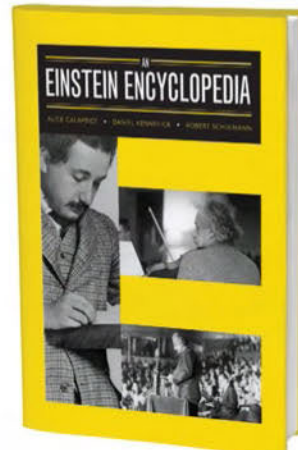
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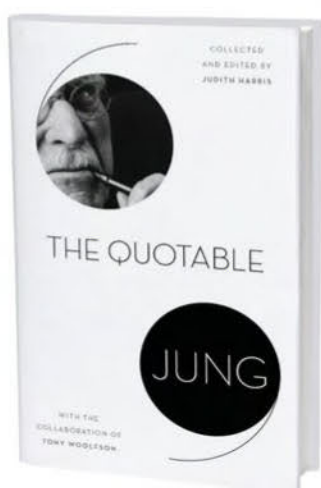
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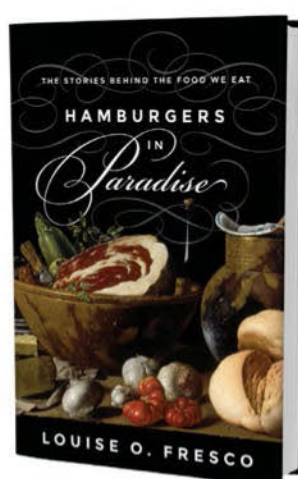
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produced by his master, Andrea del Sarto. Vasari has inked a delicate frame around the figure, a black chalk study with delicate highlights of red on the cheeks. A scrolled label at the bottom identifies ANDREA DEL SARTO as the author in elegant classical capitals. Here, at least, the pupil's awe at his teacher's talent has silenced every criticism.

This cherished drawing, along with a choice selection of other *disegni* from the master's hand, three paintings, and a thoughtful catalog edited by Julian Brooks, Denise Allen, and Xavier Salomon make up "Andrea del Sarto: The Renaissance Workshop in Action," the first show in the United States ever to be dedicated exclusively to this exceptionally influential artist. With works that represent virtually every stage of the artistic process except the first spark of an idea inside the painter's head, and helpful labels to point out the essentials of each drawing, we can see why Vasari could find his extraordinary master both so sublime and so exasperating.

Like Brunelleschi before him and Benvenuto Cellini after, Andrea, the son of a tailor (*sarto*), trained first as a goldsmith. Long before he touched gold, however, he had learned to draw, with pen and ink, the standard medium for *disegno* in the fifteenth century, and also with sticks of hard red and softer black chalk. Leonardo and Michelangelo had been pioneers in the use of rust-red chalk, mined near Siena, and Andrea followed their example just as he adopted their innovations in his paintings. The hardness of red chalk provided a strong, definite line—brilliant talent that he was, Andrea normally laid out his compositions in a few flawless strokes—but chalk could also be smudged to create delicate contrasts of light and shadow. Sometimes the artist created wash effects by going over his chalk drawings with a watery paintbrush.

As a child of the late fifteenth century (Andrea was born in 1486, three years after Raphael), he learned to draw with pen and ink and to paint with egg tempera, a quick-drying medium that created hard edges and glossy surfaces, as well as fresco, which produced equally crisp outlines on chalky white plaster. By the early sixteenth century, however, Florentine painters like Fra Bartolommeo and Andrea had begun to prefer oil, which dried more slowly and could be applied in diaphanous layers to produce a softer sheen. Andrea reveled in his own version of Leonardo's *sfumato*—"smoky"—technique, which created dramatic shifts between light and shadow, but with such subtle changes in color that human flesh seemed soft to the touch and landscapes seemed to be shrouded in mist.

To these delicate textures, he added the blazing pastel colors that Michelangelo had unveiled on the Sistine Chapel ceiling in 1512 and the stately grace that Raphael was developing for his human figures in the teens of the sixteenth century. Andrea's painting is softer-edged than Raphael's, and his faces, with their deep-set eyes, have a brooding quality all their own that would inspire his pupil Jacopo Carucci da Pontormo to strive for that same intensity of expression.

Like any ambitious artist of his time, Andrea drew from ancient sculpture as well as nature; for artists of the Renaissance, the work of the ancients was nearly as divine as the work of the Creator. Sometimes the sculptural derivation of a drawing is obvious, as in the case of the red chalk *Study of the Head of an Old Man in Profile* from Berlin—this is an ancient Roman portrait of the poet Homer, and Andrea has perfectly captured the chilly sheen of light reflecting from marble. At other times, we may wonder whether the study of an arm or leg is based on the observation of stone or

The sitter is not Andrea's wife Lucrezia, who makes her appearance elsewhere, in a gorgeous black chalk portrait that makes the most of a medium that emphasizes the contrast between light and shade. Unmarked paper creates the highlights on Lucrezia's skin; the rest has been smudged to a delicate *sfumato*. In a masterful touch, tiny, almost imperceptible patches of light outline the bottom of her nose and chin to give her a lifelike glow; this is the work of a man who has looked long and lovingly at this beautiful face, perhaps as young Giorgio

them now visible in a smear of *pentimenti*, it still seems to have come out too small. Curators can penetrate still deeper into a painting with the help of a technique known as infrared reflectography, which uses a special camera to photograph how wavelengths longer than the range of visible light reflect from its layers of pigment. In the case of the Medici *Holy Family*, the detailed red chalk drawing of a wizened elderly woman looks very much like Andrea's underdrawing for the figure of Saint Elizabeth on the painting itself. But the features of the Saint Elizabeth we see in the final painting have been smoothed and softened, her face turned into a more perfect oval, her wrinkles blurred. The unblinking detail of the drawing has been transformed into an ethereal vision.

This gauzy, ethereal softness seems to be one of the ways that Andrea del Sarto identifies his holy figures as belonging to another realm. We can see the same transformation from the exquisite black chalk portrait of a youth—who seems to be somewhat surprised that he has been taken into the artist's studio for a sitting—to the serene painted figure of a young John the Baptist in the wilderness. Between these two large sacred paintings in the Frick's Oval Room hangs Andrea's portrait of a young scholar with unmistakably individual features, including a cleft chin, strong nose, and brilliant eyes, the eyes and nose equally prominent in a swift preliminary sketch executed in red chalk.

He is a scholar, not a saint, and Andrea portrays him with precision in a clear beam of light as he looks back over his shoulder in an arresting pose that owes something to Raphael's equally arresting portrait of the handsome Florentine banker Bindo Altoviti. But not everything about this precisely lit image is clear; the whitish object the young man holds has sometimes been identified as a block of marble, clay, or a brick, which would make this painting the portrait of an artist, whereas the catalog identifies the object in his hands—as did this viewer—as a book.

The Frick is a marvelous place to compare Andrea's virtuosity with that of other great painters from the same Italian tradition. In contrast to an artist like Paolo Veronese, who paints with unrelenting intensity right to the very corners of his canvases, or Raphael, who can give a tiny background the same definition as the main event, Andrea concentrates his effort on a few central figures, or, as in the case of the scholar with the book that can also read as a block, on a face, leaving the rest in a pleasant haze. This uneven level of attention is surely what Vasari meant when he said that Andrea "lacked the elaboration, grandeur, and versatility of style that can be seen in others." His paintings, beneath their ravishing surfaces, are rather stark and simple compared with the pinpoint detail of Bronzino, or Vasari's crowd scenes, or Pontormo's intricately interlaced compositions.

Like his contemporary Baccio Bandinelli, a divine draftsman and a competent sculptor, Andrea del Sarto may be one of those Florentine artists for whom drawing had become an activity that Giorgio Vasari was perhaps the first to understand in all its significance: the most essential act in the mysterious process of making art. □



Andrea del Sarto: Portrait of a Young Man, circa 1517-1518

skin. Amusingly, we also find Andrea's assistants pressed into service as models from classical or biblical antiquity. One kneels reverently, holding a sack that the master will turn into a lamb offered to the Christ Child for an *Adoration of the Shepherds*. And the red chalk portrait of Julius Caesar that starts off the exhibition sprouts an almost transparent wisp of beard; this Caesar is drawn not from sculpture, but from life, and perhaps from life as it was lived in Andrea's studio (see illustration on page 30).

Some of these drawings from half a millennium ago strike an uncannily modern note: the luminous figure of a young woman emerges from a densely cross-hatched shadow like the young girls in some of Picasso's *Minotaur* etchings from the 1930s; the black chalk drawing of a draped leg can also read as an abstract pattern of spiky, jagged lines. Visitors seem to linger with particular attention over the refined red chalk figure of a young girl who bows her head as tendrils of hair fall around her face, perhaps the sketch for a penitent Mary Magdalene.

Vasari was looking daggers from the sidelines.

Three paintings provide insight into the way that *disegno* accompanied Andrea at every step of creation, from idea to paper preliminaries to painted panel (as a legacy of his tempera tradition, he preferred wood to canvas). His relentless activity of drawing and redrawing did not stop with sketches and cartoons; it continued as underdrawing on the panel itself and then in incessant revisions of outlines and figures before the paint finally dried once and for all. Because pigments change with time, details that were once covered over by a layer of paint sometimes begin to emerge again; these ghosts are termed, not quite accurately, *pentimenti*, "repentances" (when they are really the original sin, not the repentance).

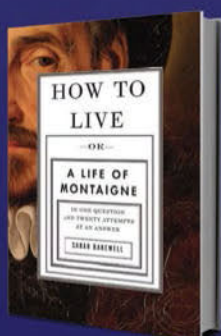
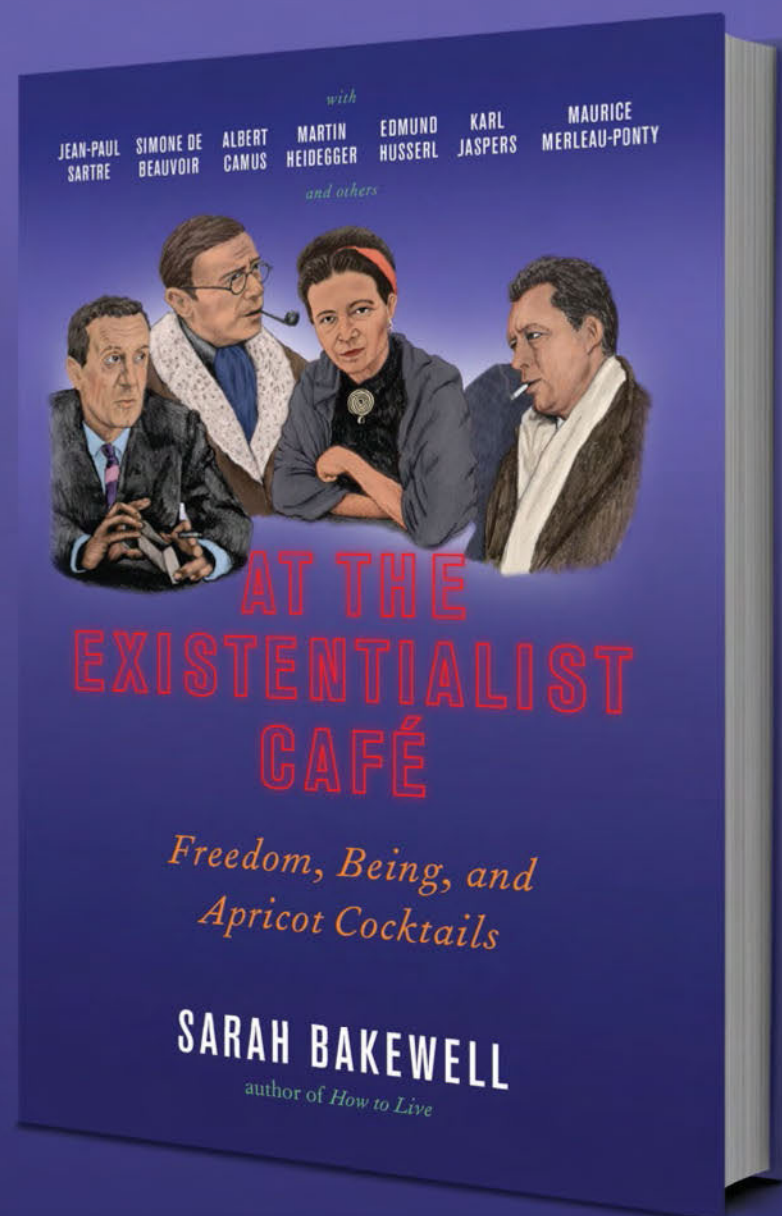
In the *Holy Family* that Andrea painted for Ottaviano de' Medici, the painter turns out to have struggled long and hard with one of the Christ Child's legs, yet after two or three tries, all of

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# Inside the Emperors' Clothes

G. W. Bowersock

## SPQR:

**A History of Ancient Rome**

by Mary Beard.

Liveright, 606 pp., \$35.00

## Dynasty:

**The Rise and Fall of the House of Caesar**

by Tom Holland.

Doubleday, 482 pp., \$30.00

## Néron en Occident:

**Une figure de l'histoire**

by Donatien Grau.

Paris: Gallimard, 407 pp., €32.00

The empire of ancient Rome spanned the entire Mediterranean world. It included two of the world's great monotheist religions, Judaism and Christianity, and it provided the environment for the creation of a third, Islam. Historians from antiquity to the present have struggled to comprehend how a small Italian town grew from modest beginnings into a republic and then, after a succession of civil wars, into a great empire. Edward Gibbon was not the only one to recognize that the market for Roman history was huge. It still is, not least because of its colorful and larger-than-life rulers but above all because it embraced so many different and yet interconnected peoples. From the Atlantic to the Euphrates, from the Rhine and the Danube to the edge of the Sahara, Rome transformed and refashioned the cultures it absorbed, and we live today with the aftermath of its conquests.

Rome's achievement was as paradoxical as it was immense. It seems to have happened without any design or master plan. Gibbon was the first to see that this global transformation could be explained neither by listing dates and sources nor by appealing to divine intervention. The antiquarians who preceded Gibbon not only failed to explain Rome's rise but failed to perceive, as he conspicuously did, that Roman history had all the ingredients for a great work of literature. Gibbon set the gold standard for literary history, which not even Johann Gustav Droysen on Alexander the Great or Francis Parkman on France and England in America could match. His success was arguably due as much to his great theme as to his tireless industry in composing his work. The three books under review prove that the appetite for Roman history continues unabated to this day.

Anglophone readers have every reason to rejoice that Gibbon, the first and greatest of modern Roman historians, wrote in their language. Theodor Mommsen, who won the Nobel Prize for writing about ancient Rome in German, knew perfectly well that he was no Gibbon. He steadfastly refused to bring his Roman history into the imperial period, where he would have had to compete with his admired eighteenth-century English predecessor. Apart from Ronald Syme's *The Roman Revolution* of 1939, which distilled the irony and insight of Tacitus's Latin into lapidary English prose, no histories of Rome in English have achieved Gibbon's unique combination of deep scholarship and literary style.



Emperor Nero; painting by Abraham Janssens, 1618

Yet by an astonishing coincidence two contemporary English authors who write often and well about ancient Rome, Mary Beard and Tom Holland, have simultaneously produced readable histories of Rome. It would be patronizing and wrong to speak of their work as popularization, but there can be little doubt that both writers are deservedly popular. Between them they have done more to promote classical studies than all the professors who try to reach thousands through the electronic programs currently known as massive open online courses (MOOCs).

The new books by Beard and Holland overlap most closely in their treatment of the end of the Roman Republic and the first century of the empire, but they also look backward as far as Romulus and Remus. Both show the experience of the two writers in communicating with a general audience by beginning in the middle of the narrative, to engage the reader's attention, and then circling back to fill in what came before. Beard starts with Cicero's exposure in 63 BC of the conspiracy of Catiline, and Holland starts in 40 AD with Caligula sitting on a beach on the coast of France looking out toward Britain. These opening pages draw the reader inexorably into the complex web that the authors are spinning.

But the books could not be more different. Beard expressly calls *SPQR*

"a history of ancient Rome," and her opening sentence bluntly asserts, "Ancient Rome is important." Her title is the standard ancient abbreviation for *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, "the Senate and People of Rome," and as she points out, it still adorns manhole covers and rubbish bins in Rome today. No one could doubt that what she has written has contemporary relevance. Her history evokes a past that visibly impinges upon the present, as modern travelers in Europe, the Balkans, Anatolia, North Africa, and the Near East are constantly made aware.

By the time Beard has finished, she has explored not only archaic, republican, and imperial Rome, but the eastern and western provinces over which it eventually won control. She deploys an immense range of ancient sources, in both Greek and Latin, and an equally wide range of material objects, from pots and coins to inscriptions, sculptures, reliefs, and temples. She moves with ease and mastery through archaeology, numismatics, and philology, as well as a mass of written documents on stone and papyrus.

Not unreasonably Beard brings her history to a close with the conferral of Roman citizenship by the emperor Caracalla in 212 AD upon virtually everyone who lived within the confines of the Roman Empire. What historians have traditionally called the Crisis of the Third Century was just about to

begin. This brought the devastating replacement of the Parthians—an Iranian empire that had, since the first century BC, fought occasionally with the Romans—by the Sassanian Persians, who would soon invade Syria. The crisis also included barbarian invasions from the north and a great plague. The conversion of Constantine to Christianity was still a century away. Beard could not have covered those tumultuous times without writing another large volume, but she rightly looks ahead to Constantine just as she looks back to Romulus.

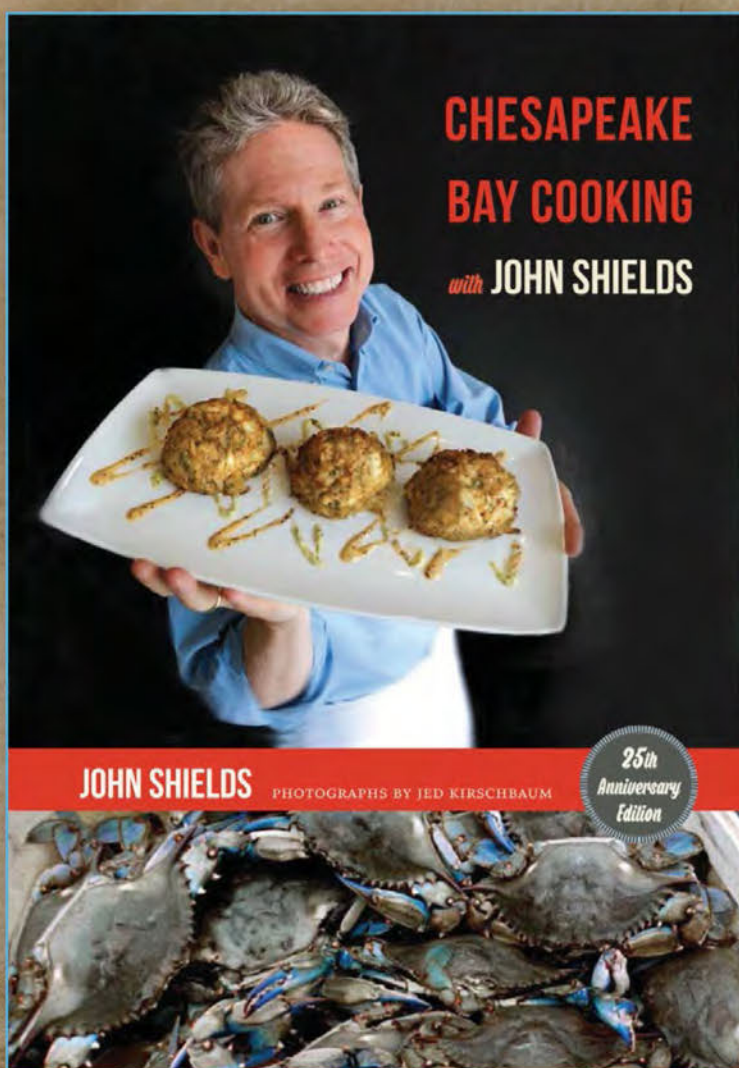
Holland's book is not like this. His title, *Dynasty*, tells us at once, with the aid of a subtitle, *The Rise and Fall of the House of Caesar*, that this is a story rather than a work of history. It is a novel about historical events and personalities that will be familiar to most readers from Robert Graves, but it is not fiction. It reproduces, with marmoreal grandeur, what Holland has learned directly from ancient sources, above all Tacitus and Suetonius, about the court intrigues, sexual scandals, and monstrous personalities that dominated the Julio-Claudian age—the period of the first five Roman emperors—Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. The frightful eccentricities of the last of the Julio-Claudians included murdering his mother and presiding over a vast conflagration at Rome that has been thought to have wiped out many of the Christians in the city.

Holland's novelistic approach enhances a story that he has not invented. This means that his account is gripping and occasionally eloquent, but sometimes the larger historical setting vanishes as he concentrates on vivid personalities at the expense of the vast empire within which all the domestic horrors were taking place. The Gibbonian miracle had been the felicitous union, in a single writer, of a thoughtful historian and a memorable narrator, but this was possible because Gibbon brought an uncommonly large vision to his scholarly and literary gifts. He famously called his work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, whereas Holland seems to like single-word titles—*Dynasty* for the new one on the Julio-Claudians and *Rubicon* for an earlier one on Julius Caesar. This seems to be part of a current fashion, to judge from the work of another expert writer on Rome in a novelistic style, Robert Harris, who shows a similar predilection for single-word titles: *Imperium*, *Conspirata*, and now his forthcoming *Dictator*.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, in *SPQR*—not a single word, of course, though admirably concise—Beard spreads out the uncertainties and inconsistencies that every historian must face in sorting out what really happened in the past. She has no hesitation in breaking the continuity of her account by jumping backward and

<sup>1</sup>Knopf, 2016.





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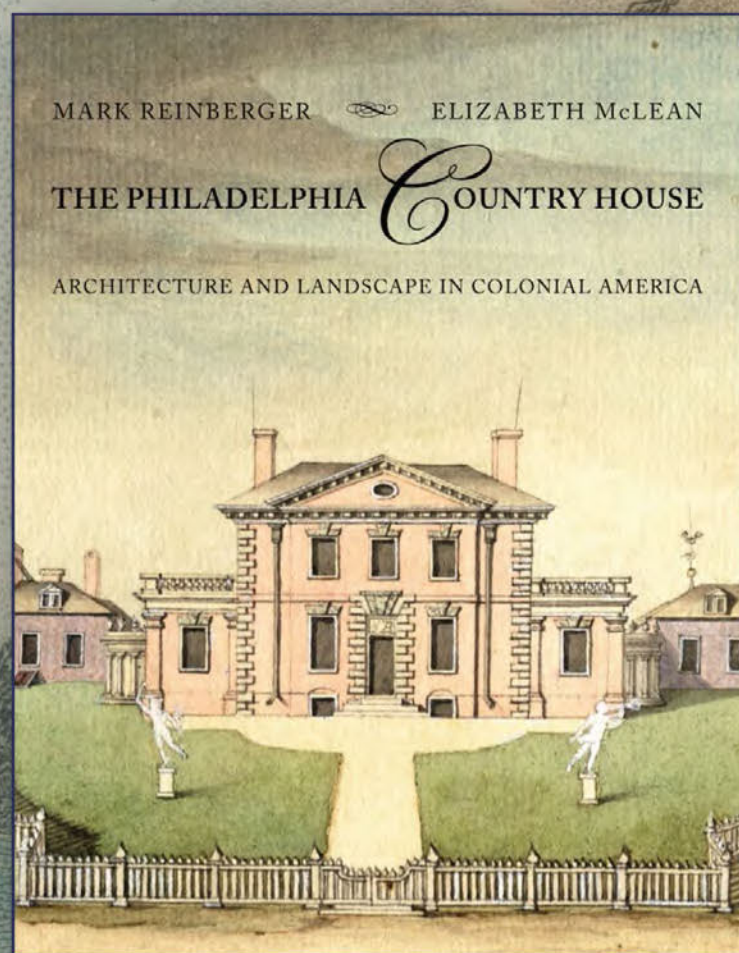
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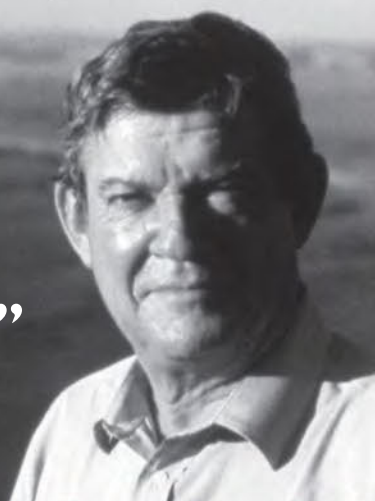
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forward to illuminate her argument and by wandering freely across the entire Mediterranean world to provide glimpses of provincial life. She is not telling a story.

Near the end of her book, in a close-up for which she draws on personal knowledge of the site, she suddenly transports her reader to the monuments and history of the city of Aphrodisias in modern Turkey—a city named for the goddess of love that, in the Christian empire, would become Staupolis, "the city of the cross." Splicing of this kind is indispensable in writing good history, and Beard gives her readers a master class in historical analysis, with due attention to the reliability of sources, the corruption of traditions, politically motivated myth-making, and the mysterious process by which perceptions of the past determine the course of subsequent events.

Beard begins simply enough by declaring that her account of the Senate and people of Rome will begin in the year 63 BC, the year of Catiline's great conspiracy to overthrow the Roman Republic dominated by Julius Caesar, a plot that Cicero prided himself on exposing. She even asserts, "Roman history, as we know it, started here." Why this should be is not at all obvious to me. Although 63 is not a bad place to start an account of the collapse of the Roman Republic, it must be said that a thoughtful eyewitness, Asinius Pollio, who wrote an influential, though now lost, account of the end of the republic, opted to begin in 60, when Pompey and Caesar became allies. This was famously the year with which the great modern historian of Rome, Ronald Syme, began his classic history, *The Roman Revolution*, and it was Pollio's example that inspired him to do so.

By starting with 63, instead of 60, Beard must have known that she was repudiating the date that Syme and Pollio had adopted. She does not address this issue, but unexpectedly in the middle of her book she gives a reference to the first poem in Book Two of Horace's *Odes*, where the year 60 is named as the launchpad of civil war. It was precisely in this poem that Horace celebrated the audacity of Asinius Pollio in writing a history about inflammatory events that were so recent the embers were still glowing.

To my eyes Pollio rightly marked the beginning of the civil war that brought down the Roman Republic, and it would have made more sense to start here. But even had Beard begun with this date, she would still have had to provide background from centuries before in order to give her readers the necessary perspective to understand what was going on. Beard is an experienced scholar, teacher, and communicator, and she enriches her history by preventing it from becoming a more or less chronological register of events. Her many years in front of students, colleagues, and television cameras have accustomed her to convey a wealth of information and ideas in a chatty style that no one should mistake for a lack of substance, erudition, or insight.

Beard's relatively brief account of the Julio-Claudians is more than supplemented by the detailed narrative that Holland has provided in *Dynasty*. His story, though essentially centered upon

Rome and its court, provides many lubricious details for which Beard has no space. Apart from the outrageous conduct of Caligula, whom professional historians scrupulously call Gaius, it is Nero who dominates the final years of the Julio-Claudian dynasty that descended from Augustus. This paranoid emperor, who loved to act and sing on stage, felt himself at heart more a Greek than a Roman, and he proceeded relentlessly, after a few tranquil years at the start, to commit crime and engage in depraved acts until his suicide in 68. Yet his reign left its mark through the magnificent Latin literature of his own time and subsequently in the retrospective literature of Western Europe down to the present.

In a wide-ranging book that is more about the perception of Nero after his death than the character of the man in his lifetime, a talented French writer, Donatien Grau, interrogates the sources for the emperor's reign not only from Nero's own time but from many centuries after. His book begins, as it should, with a review of the Latin masterpieces that Neronian writers, such as Seneca the philosopher, Petronius the novelist (author of the *Satyricon*), and Lucan the epic poet (author of the *Pharsalia*), have left behind. They were writing in the very years when Nero presented himself with increasing flamboyance as a Hellene, performing on stage and competing in the Olympic games.

Grau subtly creates an illuminating counterpoint between the undoubted achievements of Neronian culture and the delusions of the emperor himself. In this respect he can offer interpretations that neither Beard nor Holland attempts to provide, and he does so with an engagingly Gallic rhetoric that serves to highlight the differences between the ways Roman history is practiced on the two sides of the Channel. Grau, for example, questions Syme's total confidence in the veracity of Tacitus by observing that in Roman studies reactions to ancient claims of accuracy and good faith have been "absolutely contradictory."

What emerges above all from a comparison of the Nero of Beard, Holland, and Grau is that none of them really tries to get at Nero himself, beyond the caricature and criminality that appear so often in the ancient sources. Since we actually possess several letters from Nero and one long speech, it might have been useful to consider what the man reveals in lines that he may have composed himself.

We know from Tacitus that Seneca sometimes served as a ghostwriter for Nero's speeches, and he may also have served in that capacity for letters and administrative communications. But a major speech at Corinth, coming after Seneca's suicide, which was demanded by Nero, and composed in pretentiously florid Greek, seems obviously to transmit the emperor's authentic voice across two millennia. Its discovery in modern times on an inscription from Akraiphia in Boeotia, north of Athens, was first made known in 1888, as Grau is aware, by the great French epigraphist Maurice Holleaux, who immediately recognized the highly personal tone of the emperor's Greek: "le style précieux et sentimental à faux, l'emphase égoïste [the precious and





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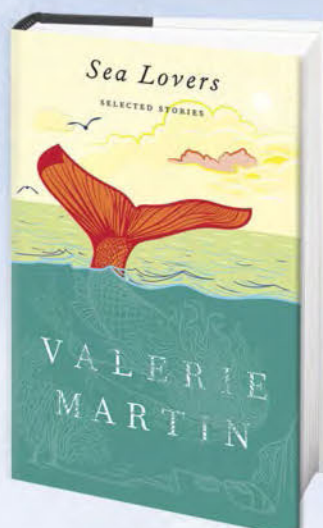
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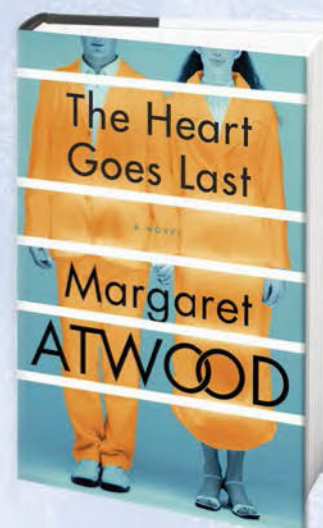
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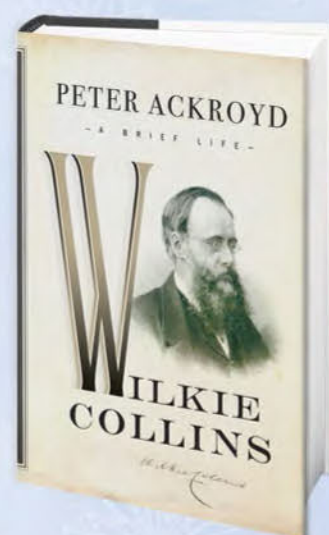
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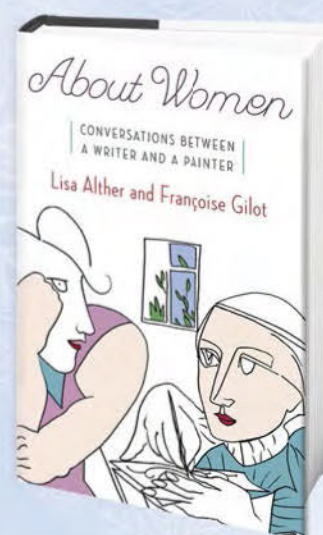
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falsely sentimental style, the emphatic egotism]."

Eighteen lines of text present Nero in 67 AD at Corinth, at the time of the Olympic competition nearby, when the emperor granted freedom to Greece, or rather, as it was then known, the province of Achaëa. Nero was obviously very pleased with what he was doing, and his training in a style of Greek that was often described as Asian served him well. Nero's generosity had no future, because only a few years later the emperor Vespasian revoked Nero's gift and restored the Greeks to their prior provincial status. But the speech itself furnishes a unique glimpse into a brief moment of triumph and self-satisfaction near the pathetic end of a monarch who reportedly declared as he was dying, "What an artist dies in me!" Here is Nero to his beloved Hellenes:

For you, men of Greece, it is an unexpected gift which, even though nothing from my generous nature is un hoped-for, I grant to you—such a great gift that you would have been incapable of requesting it. All Greeks inhabiting Achaëa and what is now known as the Peloponnesus, receive freedom with no taxation—something which none of you ever possessed in your most fortunate of times, for you were subject to others or to yourselves. Would that Greece were still at its peak as I grant you this gift, in order that more people might enjoy this favor of mine. For this reason I blame Time for exhausting prematurely the size of my favor. But even now it is not out of pity for you but out of goodwill that I bestow this benefaction, and I give it in exchange to your gods whose forethought for me on land and sea I have always experienced, because they granted me the opportunity of conferring such benefits. Other leaders have liberated cities, only Nero a province.

This glimpse into the emperor's unbridled megalomania is far more precious than any attempt to deduce his character from the ancient authors who wrote about him. It is not part of later reportage or a novelistic invention, as Holland clearly recognized when he chose to cite a brief excerpt from it in his account of Nero's Greek tour. It is a raw historical document, almost without parallel. Only the surviving text of a rambling speech by the emperor Claudius to the Senate is comparable in its immediacy, but not in its extravagant language. What Gibbon would have done with Nero's speech if it had been known to him is hard to imagine, because in this case reality itself goes far beyond any irony.

It is of course natural to wonder what the Greeks themselves might have

made of this imperial flattery of their gods and their culture through the medium of their own language at its most artificial. But the sober Plutarch, writing a decade or two after Nero's great gesture, leaves us in no doubt that, however ridiculous Nero may have appeared at Corinth, the Greeks genuinely appreciated him as an emperor who admired their ancient traditions. Plutarch declared that for all Nero's crimes the Hellenic peoples owed him some measure of gratitude for his goodwill toward them, and a century later Philostratus, the biographer of the legendary miracle-worker



"Study for the Head of Julius Caesar"; drawing by Andrea del Sarto, circa 1520. It is on view in the exhibition at the Frick Collection reviewed by Ingrid Rowland on page 22 of this issue.

Apollonius of Tyana, said that Nero showed unusual wisdom in freeing the Greeks.

Mary Beard observes that after Nero's death several pretenders to the imperial throne arose in the eastern Mediterranean world by claiming to be the still-living Nero. Beard astutely remarks of these so-called "false Neros" that their deception "suggests that in some areas of the Roman world Nero was fondly remembered: no one seeks power by pretending to be an emperor universally hated." This was a strange fate for the last of the Julio-Claudians, whose memory was so detested generally that his name was systematically gouged out in most of the inscriptions in which it appeared.

Over the centuries after Nero's death the greatest example of his megalomania undoubtedly remained the fire at Rome in 64, in which, according to Tacitus, Christians were crucified and burned alive. The authority of Tacitus has conferred upon this horror a degree of credibility that has even led historians to assume that the fiery deaths of Christians at Rome were but part of a more general policy of persecution launched by Nero. Although few now believe that the emperor promulgated some kind of *institutum* against the

Christians, most historians, including Beard, Holland, Grau, and myself, still believe that Christians died, as Tacitus says they did, in the fire of 64.

But even this apparently solid testimony for early Christian persecution has now been forcefully challenged. Our view of Neronian Rome and early Christianity would be dramatically altered if the crucified and flaming Christians in 64 turned out to be mythical, as the Princeton historian Brent Shaw now claims they are. His recent and carefully reasoned article in support of this view rests essentially upon a conviction that it would be anachronistic to refer to Christians in 64, since he questions whether they were then identified as such. Therefore he believes that Tacitus's version of the fire derives from a fiction, Christian or otherwise, that was devised and disseminated at some point between 64 and the time when he was writing, more than five decades later.<sup>2</sup>

Shaw's argument is well made and persuasive at many points, but I still find it hard to believe that there were no Christians in Neronian Rome, when, at least according to the Acts of the Apostles, they were already known under that name at Antioch in the 60s. Suetonius, who was a contemporary of Tacitus and, like him, more than half a century removed from the events he was writing about, even believed that the name of Christ, whom he calls Chrestus, was known at Rome in the 40s when Claudius expelled the Jews from

the city. But this may be no more than a vestige of reports that Jesus's first followers were Jews. Nevertheless it is both important and humbling to recognize that the history with which we have all grown up can change in the twinkling of an eye when a scholar as acute and deeply read as Shaw detects cracks in an edifice we thought we knew well.

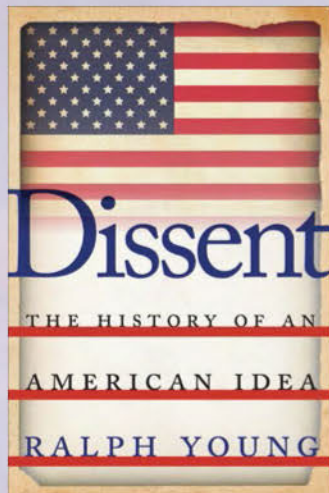
Beard is absolutely correct in her opening manifesto that Roman history is important. The world she evokes, through its material culture as much as its textual sources, is a world in which we are, as Grau insists, deeply rooted. Holland conveys its excitement and its fascination in a way that no scholarly tinkering with details can possibly diminish. All three books testify to the enduring appeal of Roman history, but in different ways. Gibbon's theme for his great work remains as indestructible, varied, instructive, and relevant as it was in the eighteenth century. Yet when it is addressed anew, in the light of discoveries that constantly emerge from every corner of Rome's ancient empire, Roman history itself subtly changes. That in turn means that all of us who read it and write it change too. □

<sup>2</sup>Brent D. Shaw, "The Myth of the Neronian Persecution," *Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 105 (2015).

Metropolitan Museum of Art



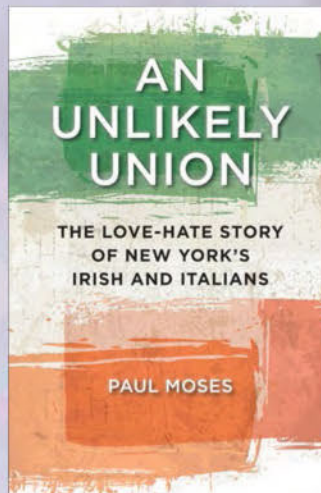
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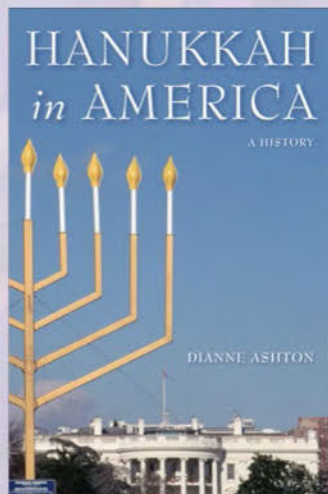
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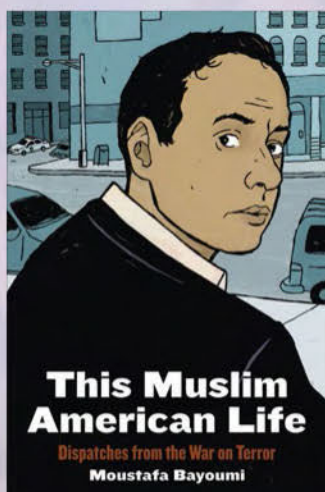
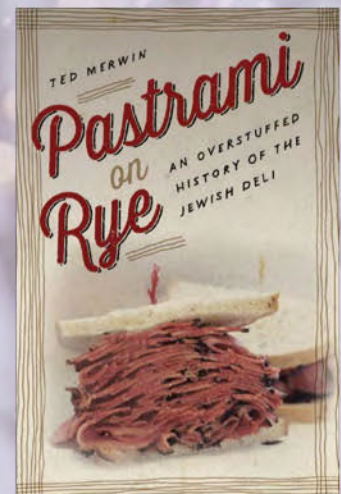
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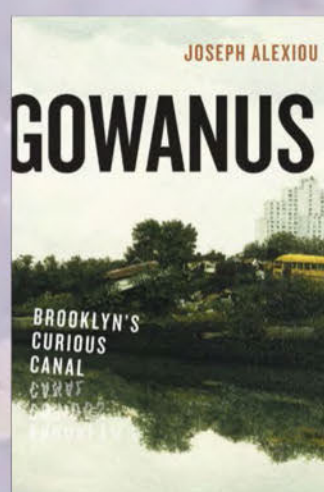
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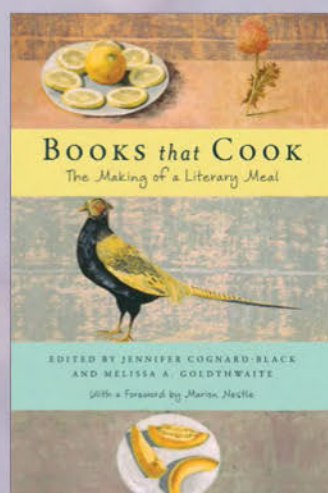
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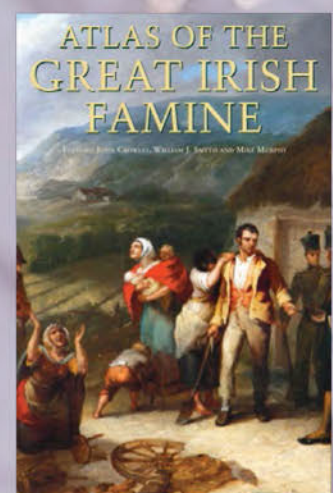
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# Sex, Money & Collecting

Christopher Benfey

**Peggy Guggenheim:  
The Shock of the Modern**  
by Francine Prose.

Yale University Press, 211 pp., \$25.00

The Guggenheim family name is attached to three major cultural institutions. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, on Upper Fifth Avenue in New York, is best known for the 1959 Frank Lloyd Wright building—its greatest single work of art—that houses the collection of what its founder called “non-objective painting.” The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, established in 1925 in honor of a nephew of Solomon’s who died at seventeen, awards fellowships to writers, artists, and scientists. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection, housed since 1951 in a single-story palazzo on the Grand Canal in Venice, is an idiosyncratic culling of some of the masterworks of modern art, from Brancusi’s *Bird in Space* to major paintings of Jackson Pollock, whom Guggenheim, who died in 1979 at the age of eighty-one, regarded as her “most important discovery.” With her characteristic eagerness to shock, Peggy—who called herself “Guggenheim Jeune” to avoid confusion with all the other Guggenheims—dismissed Wright’s inverted ziggurat in New York as “Uncle Solomon’s garage.”\*

It is one of the main arguments of Francine Prose’s consistently lively and nuanced short biography, part of Yale University Press’s Jewish Lives series, that Guggenheim’s notoriety—the result of decades of gossip about her money and her appearance as well as her own flamboyant memoir, *Out of This Century*—has shielded us from an accurate understanding of her accomplishments. Guggenheim herself considered calling her memoir “Five Husbands and Some Other Men” and claimed to have slept with over four hundred of the others. “The capricious and slightly daffy ingénue we encounter in the pages of her book,” Prose maintains,

was only a partial representation of the intelligent, determined woman who worked hard and overcame any number of obstacles (not least, the prejudice against women that then, as now, prevailed in the art world) to run galleries, build her collection, fund worthy political causes, and support a long and remarkable list of artists and writers.

Marguerite Guggenheim—first known as Maggie and then Peggy—was born on August 26, 1898, the second of the

three daughters of Benjamin Guggenheim and Florette Seligman. The Seligmans had made their fortune in retail stores and California gold; they manufactured uniforms during the Civil War and were bankers during the railroad boom after it. The Guggenheims had thrived in the rougher pursuits of copper mining and smelting. It was felt that Florette was marrying down. A telegram sent to European relatives identifying the bridegroom as “Guggenheim smelter” was mistakenly transcribed, to the delight of the Seligmans, as “Florette engaged Guggenheim smelt her.”

Peggy described her childhood as



Peggy Guggenheim on the roof of her palazzo in Venice, October 1953

“one long protracted agony.” Educated at home, she was banished from the table for saying, accurately, “Papa, you must have a mistress as you stay out so many nights.” A “rogue gene” manifested itself in disturbing behavior among her mother’s Seligman relatives, enumerated with comic relish by Prose:

Peggy’s obese Aunt Adelaide conducted a love affair with an imaginary pharmacist named Balch. Uncle Washington survived on a diet of ice and charcoal, wore jackets with zinc-lined pockets, and killed himself at fifty-six.... Her pathologically miserly Uncle Eugene was known for arriving precisely at dinnertime and assuring his relatives’ welcome by performing a trick that involved moving the dining-room chairs together and wriggling across the seats on his belly, like a snake.

Her mother neurotically repeated everything three times while Peggy herself felt compelled to retrieve used matches from the street to prevent fires, and had a nervous breakdown at age twenty.

Peggy was certainly “rich compared to most people,” Prose notes, but not “by Guggenheim standards.” Her father had gambled away much of his share of the family fortune on dubious investments, including a scheme for in-

stalling elevators in the Eiffel Tower. When he drowned on the *Titanic* in 1912—wearing formal evening clothes and refusing a life preserver as he helped passengers into lifeboats—his brothers arranged to support Peggy’s mother and sisters.

Guggenheim was often accused of stinginess, but “the barbed critique of her parsimony,” as Prose calls it, was the result of a generous woman with limited funds to bestow on the many artists and writers who depended on her. The “clichés of antisemitism,” so

Like a number of other gifted women, she came under the spell of a pretentious failed writer named John Ferrar Holms, described by Prose as resembling “a tubercular, pre-Raphaelite satyr,” who drank heavily and belittled her just as Vail had done. Guggenheim supported Holms—whom she considered “the love of her life”—and his female entourage in Hayford Hall in Devon, a country house Peggy’s friends referred to as Hangover Hall; in exchange he told her she was “pea-brained,” and claimed that his friends “wondered why he lived with her.” Other Holms acolytes, all of them freeloaders on Guggenheim’s largesse, included the writers Djuna Barnes (whom Guggenheim supported financially for many years, and who dedicated her novel *Nightwood* to her and Holms, only later to accuse Peggy of stinginess), Antonia White, and Emily Coleman.

Coleman, a free-spirited friend of Guggenheim who had helped Emma Goldman write her celebrated autobiography, described a typical, sexually charged evening centered around the “predominantly... lesbian” Barnes, an occasion that exhibits what Prose calls “the group’s shifting loyalties and boundaries”:

Djuna, who had just washed her thick red hair, “began to get very loving with John.” Waking up from a nap on the couch, Peggy noted, “This looks like rape.” As Barnes continued to embrace Holms, Peggy predicted, “He’ll assert his lump,” and went on to make a remark that tied Holms’s erection to the likelihood of her continued financial support. “If you rise, the dollar will fall.” When John told Barnes that she had written the best work of any woman in fifty years, Djuna kissed his neck.

Then she began to pound Peggy in the bottom, and Peggy shrieked, “My God, how this woman hates me,” and Djuna kept pounding her, then began to pound me. She hadn’t hit me four times before I had an orgasm.

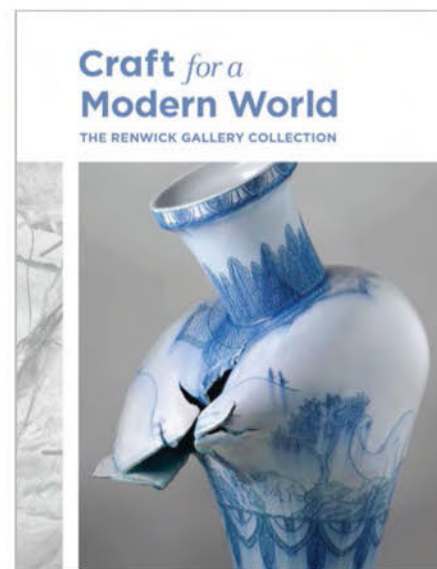
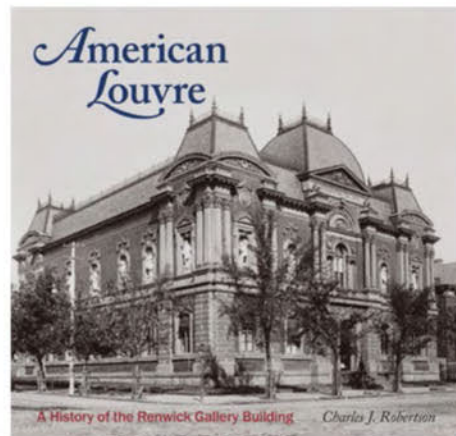
After Holms’s death, from the effects of anesthesia for minor surgery compounded by alcohol, Guggenheim took up with a struggling writer named Douglas Garman, who insisted that she read Marx instead of Proust. Peggy, who confessed that she had “pretensions to inferiority,” blamed herself, as usual, for the violence that ensued. “Garman and I had a row about Communism. And I got so bitchy that he hit me.”

Peggy Guggenheim’s real life, the life for which she is remembered, began in 1937, just shy of her fortieth birthday, when her mother died and left her a large bequest. Until then, she had never been, in her own words, “anything but a wife.” At that point, financially and, for the moment, emotionally independent, she decided to make something of herself. Her decision to open an

\*The Peggy Guggenheim Collection is now managed by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, in New York, along with branch museums in Bilbao, Spain, and other cities. The foundation recently survived a lawsuit from Peggy’s heirs, who claimed that her collection should be preserved as she left it and not augmented by loans and later purchases. See Doreen Carvajal, “Peggy Guggenheim’s Kin Lose Bid to Challenge How Her Collection Is Displayed,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 2015.



# Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery



**Crosscurrents:  
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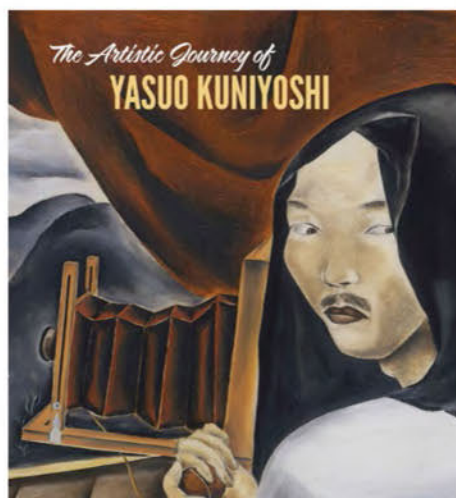
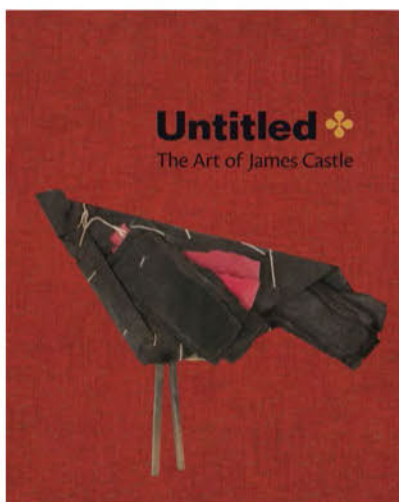
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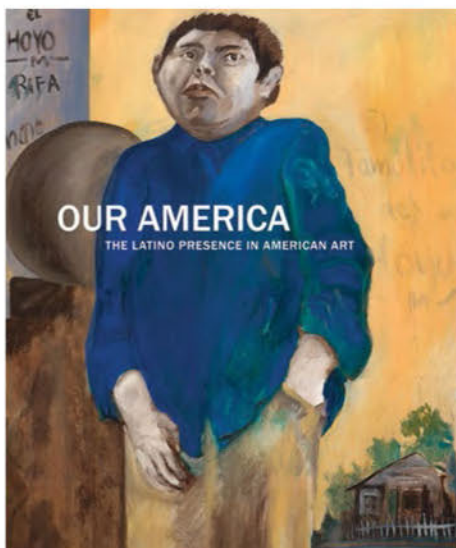
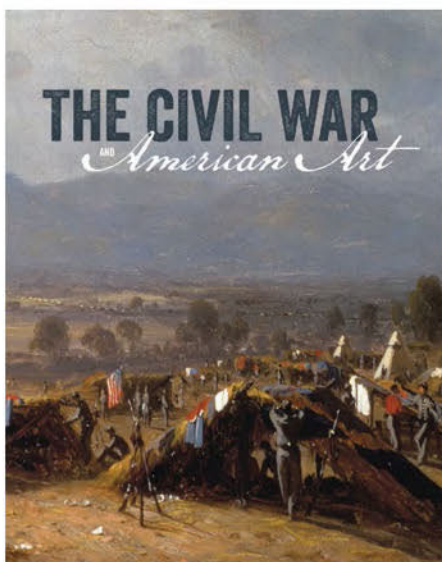
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art gallery, Prose observes, provided the occasion both to compete with her Uncle Solomon and to “unnerve her family and their stodgy friends.” Her first exhibition, at her London gallery, Guggenheim Jeune, “featured drawings that Jean Cocteau had done on bedsheets,” incorporating “his lover’s pubic hair covered over with leaves.”

Guggenheim had little background in art, beyond reading seven volumes by Bernard Berenson as she toured European museums in her early twenties. “If I could find a painting with tactile value I was thrilled,” she wrote. She made repeated visits to the 1937 Paris Exposition, where Picasso’s *Guernica* was shown. “There for the first time I was able to study modern art,” she recalled. Marcel Duchamp, whom Peggy thanked “for my introduction to the modern art world,” became the first of her trusted advisers. Her unlikely affair with the “slightly vulpine” Samuel Beckett, eight years younger than Peggy and not yet the celebrated author of *Waiting for Godot*, confirmed her preference for the most advanced contemporary art. According to Prose, Beckett, whom Peggy met at a Boxing Day party at the home of James Joyce’s son, Giorgio, “not only talked Peggy out of her preference for the Old Masters by persuading her that modern art was ‘a living thing,’ but talked her into buying modern art, which he said was her duty.”

“I am in Paris working hard for my gallery and fucking,” Peggy proudly told her friend Emily Coleman, with her usual “urge to unnerve.” Coleman compared Peggy’s profligate sex life to Djuna Barnes’s self-destructive

drinking, eliciting what Prose calls a “startling” response indicative of Peggy’s newfound self-confidence and independence:

When you compare my fucking with Djuna’s drinking I think you are wrong again. Djuna’s whole life has collapsed because of her drinking. But my fucking is only a sideshow. My work comes first every time & my children are still there. Both the center of my life. Everyone needs sex & a man. It keeps one alive & loving & feminine. If you can’t manage to make a life permanently with inferior people, & thank God I can’t, you must still now & then indulge in a physical life and its consequence.... I find men & man really stimulating but now, thank God, I have my own strengths & my inner self to fall back on.

The most controversial episode in Guggenheim’s life concerns her “art-shopping bender” as German troops approached Paris in 1940. Telling herself, with some accuracy, that she was supporting endangered artists and that her money was limited, she determined to buy a painting a day, often at bargain prices. “The day Hitler walked into Norway, I walked into Léger’s studio and bought a wonderful 1919 painting from him for one thousand dollars,” she wrote with typical jauntiness. “He never got over the fact that I should be buying paintings on such a day.”

Her unseemly negotiations with Brancusi over his *Bird in Space*, one of

the supreme masterworks of modern sculpture, are even more disturbing:

The Germans were nearing Paris when Peggy arrived to claim her sculpture, which Brancusi had been polishing by hand. Peggy professed not to know why the sculptor was unhappy to sell his masterpiece for a fraction of what it was worth. “Tears were streaming down Brancusi’s face, and I was genuinely touched. I never knew why he was so upset, but assumed it was because he was parting with his favorite bird.”

At such moments, one can’t help feeling that something was missing in Peggy Guggenheim’s temperament. This “lack of empathy”—acknowledged by Prose as a trait that “led her to fail the people she loved in ways that seem far more problematic than the flaws of which she was more often accused: promiscuity, shallowness, stinginess, and a sense of humor that sometimes crossed over into malice”—makes it difficult to share Prose’s high regard for *Out of This Century*, which she finds “as well crafted, as original, and as engaging” as that enigmatic masterpiece *Nightwood*.

Guggenheim met her match for cold calculation when she fell in love with the German Surrealist artist Max Ernst. Ernst was among the “degenerate” artists targeted by the Nazis, who found themselves unwelcome in Occupied France as well. Guggenheim worked closely with the journalist Varian Fry, “a sort of Surrealists’ Schindler,” as Prose calls him, to get Ernst and other endangered artists and writers out of France. Fry was head of the International Emergency Rescue Committee, and managed to get, by subterfuge and bribes, two hundred prominent artists and scientists out of France.

“Self-serving, faithless, and cruel,” Ernst was Peggy’s Gilbert Osmond, cynically taking her money to support his own career and his infatuation with the mentally unstable British painter Leonora Carrington. Peggy, to her dismay, appeared as an ogre in Ernst’s paintings, Carrington as a goddess. When Ernst, safe in New York, met the artist Dorothea Tanning, young and beautiful as he liked his women, he dropped Guggenheim. Still, one almost prefers Ernst’s reptilian but hard-earned cynicism—he had survived prison camps in both Nazi Germany and Vichy France, which he described “as casually as if he was referring to St. Moritz or Deauville,” and his first wife died in Auschwitz—to the monstrous brutality of Vail and Holms.

In a suspenseful prologue, Prose tells how Fry and Guggenheim managed to get both of their collections, the artists and their art, out of Marseilles in June 1941. The writer Kay Boyle, who had married Laurence Vail and bickered with Peggy about their children, told her that she had heard that Peggy’s art collection had sunk—a particularly nasty joke given the drowning of Peggy’s father.

The rescued works of art found temporary safe harbor during the war in Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery in New York, where she made a point of showing young artists, many of them women, and continued to add

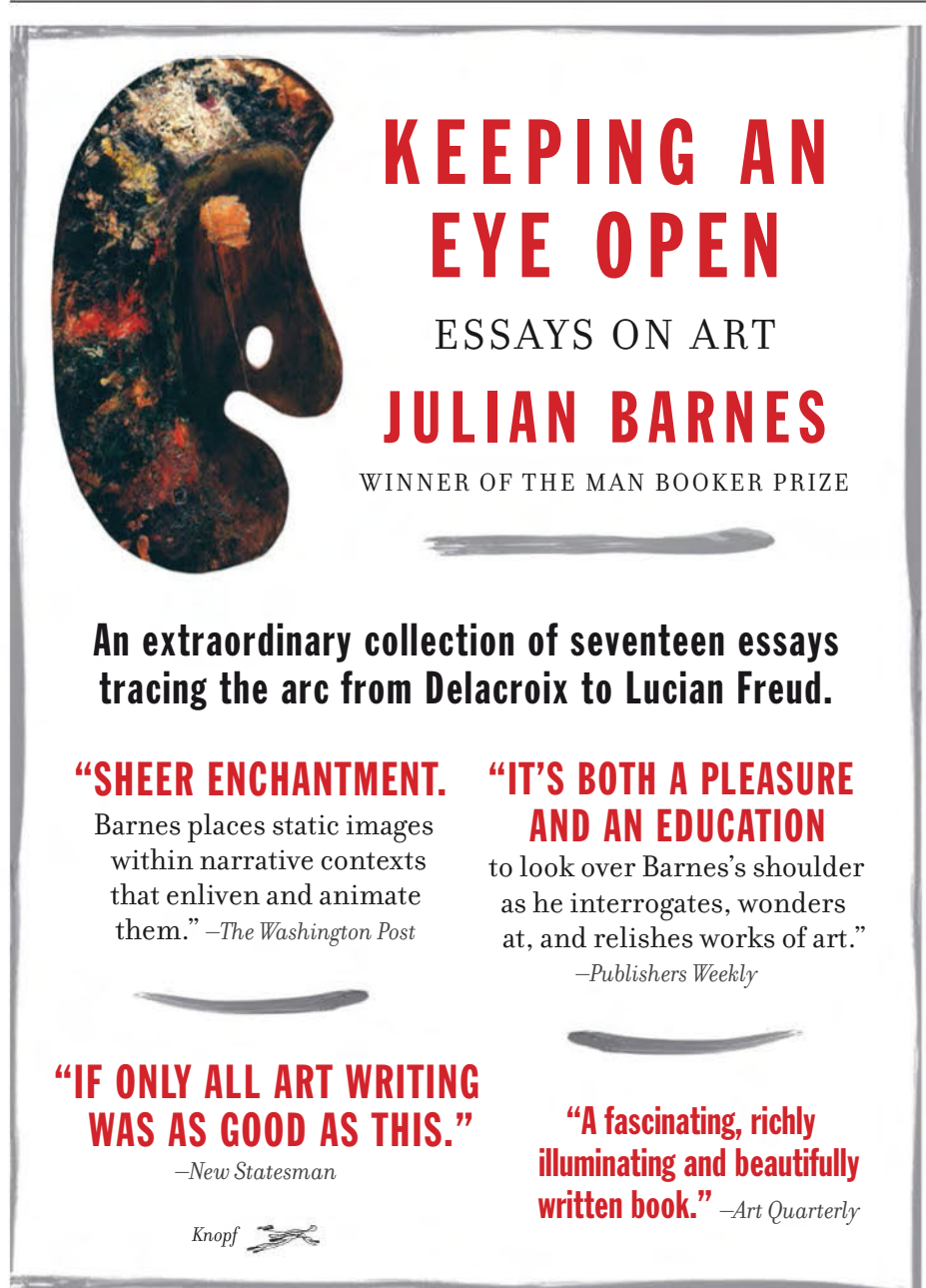
to her collection. A jury for one of her shows selected a large painting called *Stenographic Figure* by Jackson Pollock, who had been fired from his WPA job and was working as a handyman at Uncle Solomon’s “atrocious” museum. “Pretty awful, isn’t it?” Peggy said to Mondrian as he contemplated Pollock’s picture. “That’s not painting, is it?” Twenty minutes later, still studying the picture, Mondrian said, “Peggy, I don’t know. I have a feeling that this may be the most exciting painting that I have seen in a long time, here or in Europe.”

Peggy soon agreed with Mondrian. She gave Pollock four solo shows at her gallery and hired him to paint a mural in the hall of her 61st Street apartment. “From...1943 until I left America in 1947,” she wrote proudly, “I dedicated myself to Pollock.” Guggenheim (who insisted that she never slept with Pollock, and described him, when drunk, as “like a trapped animal who should never have left Wyoming”) essentially introduced Abstract Expressionism—Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Arshile Gorky—to European artists when she took her collection to the 1948 Biennale in Venice, where she established her museum three years later.

People who knew Peggy Guggenheim well were often surprised at the nasty innuendo that followed her. In January 1958, the Beat poet Gregory Corso, twenty-three at the time, met her in Venice, when she was almost sixty. In an extraordinary letter to Allen Ginsberg, Corso tried to correct what he considered the many misconceptions about her:

Very strange marvelous lady. Didn’t you see that in her? How did you miss it? Perhaps you didn’t have time, but really she is great, and sad, and does need friends. Not all those creepy painters all the time. I told her painters were making her into a creep, she laughed, led me to the boat, there we sat and when the boat came fifteen minutes later, I kissed her goodbye, while I watched her walk away I saw that she put her hand to her head as though she were in pain. I suddenly realized the plight of the woman by that gesture. She is a liver of life, and life is fading away. That’s all there is to it. It is going. God, how painful to see and know and watch it. But I will say funny things, and she will laugh, and who knows what may happen.

What happened, as in nearly all Guggenheim’s relationships with men, simply added to her pain, as Corso’s interest shifted from Peggy to her daughter. And yet, according to Prose, Corso’s letters remain “perhaps the most tender, unjudgmental, compassionate, and clear-sighted” of all the literary portraits of Peggy Guggenheim, “the most resistant to the temptations of gossip and condescension.” Prose herself, following Corso’s lead, is determined not to miss either the strangeness or the marvelousness of her subject. Guggenheim, that “intelligent, determined woman,” will no longer be quite so easily dismissed after Prose’s incisive book. Unlucky in so much else, Peggy Guggenheim is certainly fortunate in her generous and bighearted biographer. □



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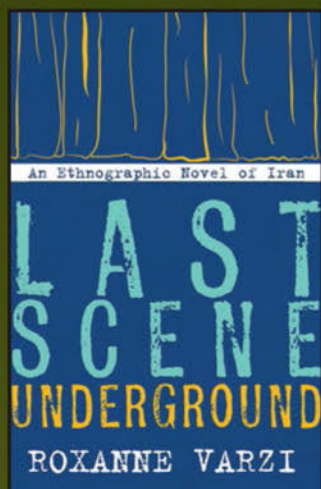
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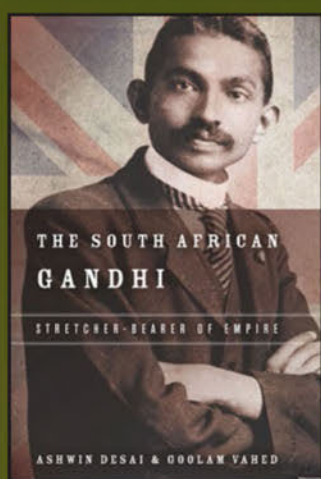
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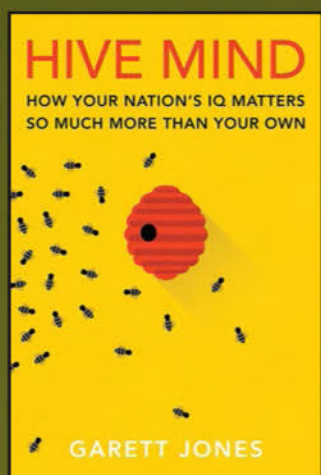
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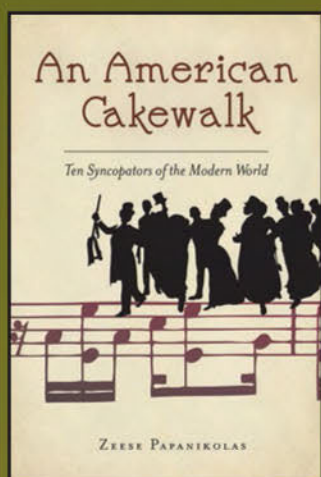
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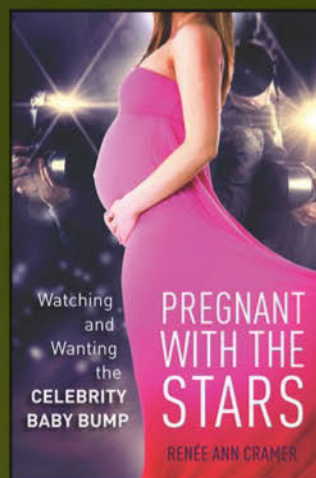
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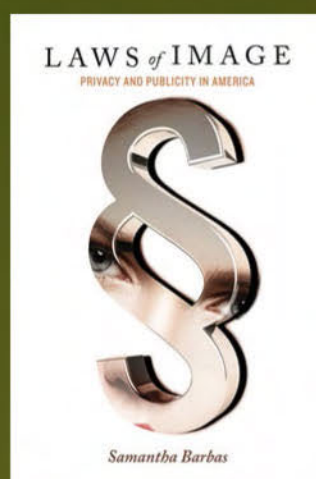
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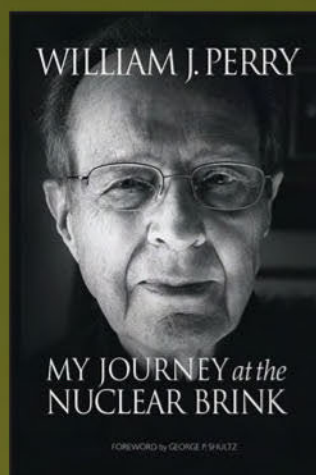
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# Hanging Out with Hitler

Martin Filler

**MAS:**  
**The Modern Architecture Symposia, 1962–1966: A Critical Edition**  
edited by Rosemarie Haag Bletter and Joan Ockman, with Nancy Eklund Later.  
The Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, 339 pp., \$80.00  
(distributed by Yale University Press)

**Hitler at Home**  
by Despina Stratigakos.  
Yale University Press, 373 pp., \$40.00

**Speer:**  
**Hitler's Architect**  
by Martin Kitchen.  
Yale University Press, 442 pp., \$37.50

## 1.

Among the odder conceits of the Romantic movement was the vogue for rendering new buildings as ruins. Inspired by Piranesi's moody *vedute* of noble Roman monuments in picturesque decay, late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century architects such as John Soane had their latest works depicted as they might look millennia in the future—bare ruin'd choirs and whited sepulchres that spoke of vanished glory and emotional depth. This bizarre practice was revived by Albert Speer, Adolf Hitler's master builder, who appealed to his patron's apocalyptic instincts by urging him to anticipate their projects' *Ruinenwert* (ruin value) and approve extra expenditures to guarantee that the Thousand-Year Reich would leave architectural remains equal to those of the ancients. Speer's vision was fulfilled sooner than he expected, and among the more popular picture postcards that Allied soldiers sent back home from Germany in 1945 were images of the architect's Berlin Chancellery of 1936–1939 as a blasted shambles and Hitler's Bavarian country house of 1935–1937 as a hollowed-out wreck.

Yet several major examples of Nazi architecture—a twelve-year outpouring of publicly financed construction that encompassed everything from the Autobahn system and the 1936 Berlin Olympic Stadium to officer-training schools and death factories—were so solidly crafted that even saturation bombing could not reduce them to rubble. Some have served several successive German governments, such as Ernst Sagebiel's sprawling, stone-clad Aviation Ministry of 1934–1935 in Berlin, which was first recycled by the Communist East Germans as the House of Ministries, then after reunification was used by the government's restitution agency, and now houses the nation's Finance Ministry.

Two decades after the war, the still-vexing question of how and even whether to deal with this long-taboo chapter in twentieth-century culture was finally addressed at the Modern

Architecture Symposia (MAS), three biennial conferences held at Columbia University in the 1960s to define and codify the Modern Movement for the first time as a historical development. Participants included many of the period's leading architecture and art scholars—including Alfred H. Barr Jr., Vincent Scully, and Rudolf Wittkower—but transcripts of most of these fascinating proceedings remained unpublished until the new critical compendium of highlights edited by Joan Ockman and my wife, Rosemarie Haag Bletter, with Nancy Eklund Later.



A postcard of the Great Hall of the Berghof, Adolf Hitler's Alpine retreat near Berchtesgaden, Bavaria, circa 1936

The historians Henry-Russell Hitchcock and George R. Collins invited their principal benefactor, Philip Johnson, to discuss Nazi architecture, a logical choice because of his fascist sympathies during the 1930s and the Stripped Classicism of his most recent buildings. But Johnson demurred, doubtless worried that his shameful political past would harm his blossoming architectural practice. Instead, at the 1964 MAS session the Vienna-born Harvard historian Eduard Sekler examined architectural reactions to Hitler in his native Austria, but admitted that until then he'd considered Nazi design merely "a rather distasteful interval." More pointedly, a Columbia graduate student (and later Cornell professor), Christian F. Otto, delivered a short, sharp overview of the ideological roots of urbanism in the Third Reich, which he characterized as "a perversion of the traditions of German architectural and planning theory" with one goal: "the absolute control of the leader over the led."

The MAS did not address the lack of women in the profession—an issue that would not fully emerge until the 1970s—but even if they had it was unlikely that much attention would have been accorded Gerdy Troost, who figures prominently in the SUNY Buffalo professor Despina Stratigakos's meticulously researched, richly detailed,

and soundly argued new study, *Hitler at Home*. Although a book about the Führer's taste in interior decoration might seem like a Mel Brooks joke, the crucial part aesthetics played in advancing the Nazi agenda was no laughing matter.

That far-reaching program—which in addition to Speer's architecture included the films of Leni Riefenstahl, the photography of Heinrich Hoffmann, the sculpture of Arno Breker, and, as Stratigakos firmly establishes, the designs of Gerdy Troost—did much to support authoritarian might

attributed to the more famous men they collaborated with (Ernst May and Le Corbusier, respectively).

Yet another member of this penumbral sisterhood was Gerdy Troost, born Sophie Gerhardine Wilhelmine Andresen in Stuttgart in 1904. Her father owned the German Woodcraft Studios, which executed high-end furniture and paneled rooms for institutional and private clients. She completed high school and worked in the family firm, where at nineteen she met the architect Paul Troost, twenty-six years her senior, whose furniture designs were fabricated there.

Troost's 1920s schemes for North German Lloyd ocean liners, including the much-admired SS *Europa*, exemplified the *Dampferstil* (steamship style) of substantial, sober, quietly luxurious Stripped Classical decor that became fashionable among those who abhorred both the most advanced Modernism—what we now call Bauhaus design—and kitschy historical revivalism. The two married in 1925, and Gerdy, who had no formal architectural training, later maintained that they were full artistic partners. In a characteristic division of labor—like that between Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his longtime collaborator (and mistress) Lilly Reich—Paul Troost concentrated on architectural design and construction while his wife attended to interiors.

Admirers of Troost's costly domestic furniture included the author of *Mein Kampf*. Newly flush with royalties from his runaway hit, Hitler outfitted the 4,300-square-foot, full-floor Munich flat he moved into in 1929 with several of the architect's pieces, including a huge desk its designer made for himself but relinquished to the rising politician after repeated requests. This was a shrewd move, for although Troost still had few buildings to his credit, Hitler felt he'd discovered the greatest architect of the age, a veritable modern-day Schinkel.

The couple was equally enchanted by the Nazi chief, who, Gerdy wrote, "behaves like a truly splendid, serious, cultivated, modest chap. Really touching. And with so much feeling and sensitivity for architecture." In 1930 he asked Paul Troost to refurbish the Nazi Party headquarters in Munich, and five years later had Atelier Troost redo his nearby apartment, which cost the equivalent of \$5.2 million today (nearly as much as Hitler later paid for the entire building).

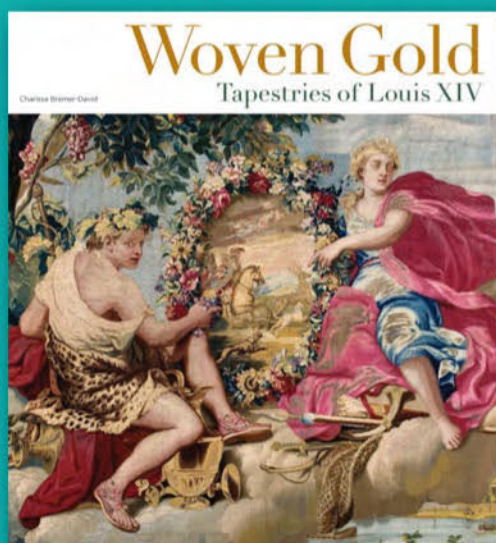
Few questioned Gerdy Troost's lack of professional qualifications, least of all herself or Hitler, who awarded her the title of Professor, highly prestigious in Germany. She eventually wielded such influence with him that even Speer, a consummate political operator, knew better than to tangle with her. His cautiousness was borne out by how, in a single stroke, she effectively ended the career of the archconservative architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg,

## 2.

Though the Modern movement in architecture reflected many advanced ideals of other social reform groups of the time, its attitudes toward women were often stubbornly retrograde. Female students at otherwise progressive art and design schools, including the Bauhaus, were routinely steered away from architecture—traditionally deemed a "masculine" pursuit—and toward weaving, embroidery, ceramics, interior decoration, and other more "feminine" occupations. Nonetheless, several strong-minded young women resisted gender stereotyping and became architect-designers of great distinction, including Grete Schütte-Lihotzky and Charlotte Perriand, whose singular contributions were long



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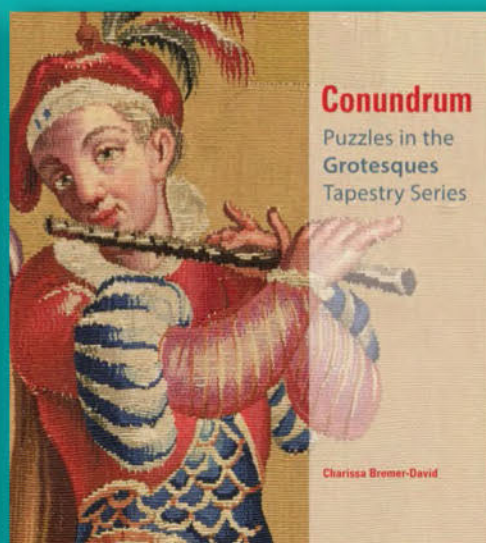


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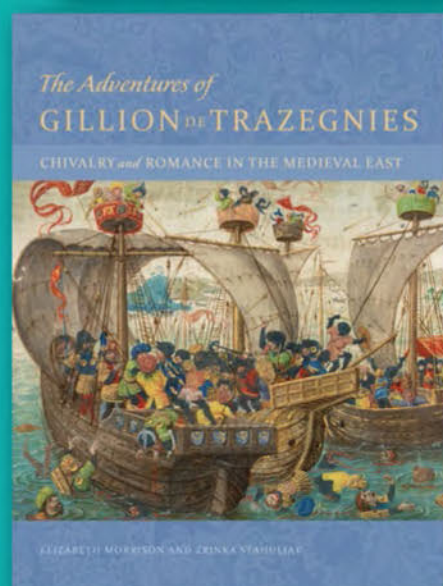


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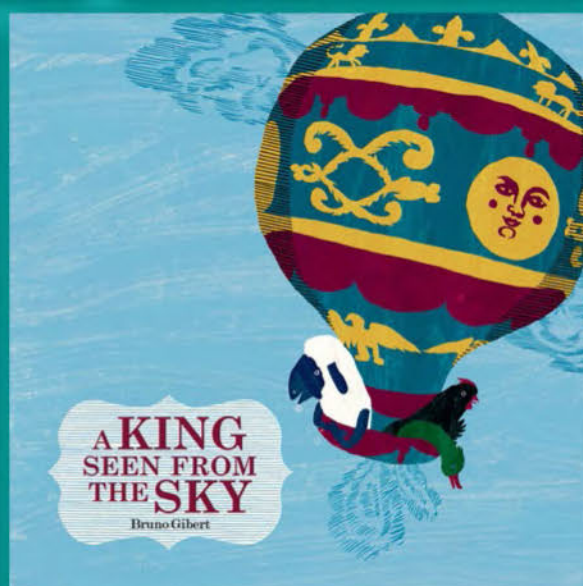


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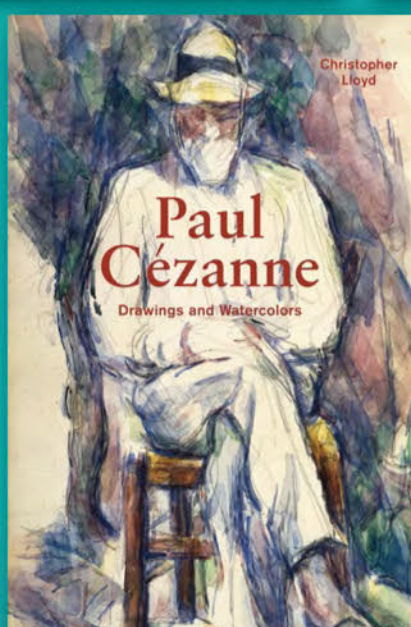


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a leading theoretician and propagandist of the nativist right-wing *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) movement, which stressed a connection between German vernacular culture and Aryan supremacy. His poisonous 1928 book *Kunst und Rasse* (Art and Race) was a foundational text in Hitler's view that modern art and architecture were degenerate and by implication Jewish. Schultze-Naumburg had fully expected to prosper as his idol's star ascended.

When Paul Troost died unexpectedly at fifty-five in 1934, a year after Hitler took power, his widow had no intention of closing their office. Big commissions were beginning to come in, most notably for the House of German Art in Munich, which she completed in 1937 to her late husband's designs, helped by his chief associate. (Bavarian wags dubbed this flat-roofed Stripped Classical structure *der Weisswursttempel* because its extruded façade of twenty-two monumental limestone columns resembles a phalanx of veal sausages.)

As a woman alone in a male-dominated profession, she became increasingly aggressive toward competitors. When Schultze-Naumburg heard that she was forging ahead with the Munich job he cracked, "Oh please, I would not let a surgeon's widow operate on my appendicitis." This got back to her, and when she accompanied Hitler to inspect Schultze-Naumburg's remodeling of the Nuremberg Opera House she exacted her revenge. During the walkthrough, Troost whispered to the dictator, who, as Stratigakos writes,

erupted in a tirade of criticism, berating the architect in front of everyone. He ordered Schultze-Naumburg to share oversight of the construction with Troost, at which point the aggrieved architect withdrew from the project... [and] had little further contact with Hitler or the Nazi Party.

Decades later, Troost disingenuously claimed she'd simply offered her professional opinion and told Hitler that the auditorium had been "very well renovated. What I found excessive was that Schultze-Naumburg had installed the swastika in very large—far too large—emblems in front of the box seats," a detail unlikely to have enraged a megalomaniac for whom overscaled Nazi symbolism knew no limits.

Troost's place in Hitler's inner circle was cemented by her interior decoration of his Alpine retreat near the village of Berchtesgaden in the Obersalzberg region of southern Bavaria. In 1928 he began renting a modest two-story hillside chalet there, named Haus Wachenfeld for its views over fields. As his fame grew he found it inadequate for entertaining on a scale commensurate with his new status, to say nothing of his desire to link himself in the public imagination with a stunning scenic setting framed by photogenic snow-capped peaks as towering as his ambitions.

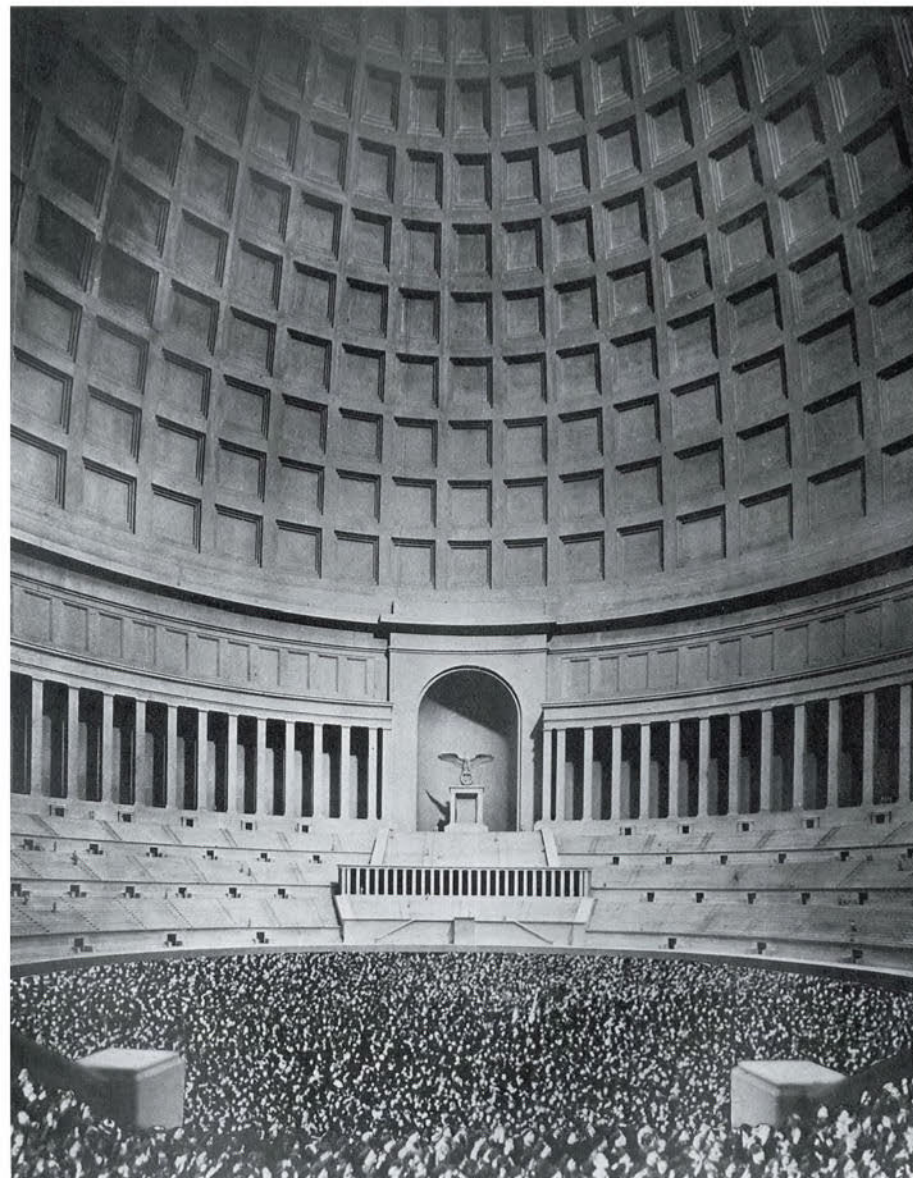
Months after he became chancellor in 1933 he bought the place and immediately embarked on the first of two major expansions. Hitler, an art school reject and would-be master builder, sketched rough plans that were smoothed out by a Munich architect. Not surprisingly, he quickly found his enlarged residence inadequate and

made it even bigger. He renamed the maxi-chalet the Berghof, which can be translated either as "mountain farm" or "mountain court," a combination of faux rusticity and imposing grandeur akin to a Thurn und Taxis princess decked out in a haute-couture dirndl.

Numerous illustrated articles about the Berghof were published in Germany and abroad, including a rapturous feature in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "Herr Hitler at Home in the Clouds" and published in August 1939, twelve days before the war began. Such publicity aroused intense interest

window could be cranked into a recess in the floor, an effect that invariably thrilled visitors. As the Nazi acolyte Unity Mitford rhapsodized to her sister Diana, wife of the British fascist leader Oswald Mosley:

The window—the largest piece of glass ever made—can be wound down...leaving it quite open. Through it one just sees this huge chain of mountains, and it looks more like an enormous cinema screen than like reality. Needless to say the génial idea was the Führer's



Albert Speer's plan for the interior of the Great Hall of the People, Berlin. It would have been the world's largest domed structure, holding 180,000 spectators, but it was never built.

in the way Hitler arranged his personal spaces, which he exploited to soften perceptions of himself as a warmonger seeking world domination.

The centerpiece of the aggrandized house was the forty-two-by-seventy-four-foot Great Hall, a bilevel eighteen-foot-high reception-cum-living room with two hallmarks of the Hitler look: a low round table surrounded by a herd of vast upholstered armchairs and a wall hung with a huge antique Gobelins tapestry. The focal point was a twelve-by-twenty-eight-foot panoramic window that overlooked Austria and the fabled Untersberg, the massif within which it was said that Charlemagne (or, according to another legend, Frederick Barbarossa) awaited resurrection to found a German Reich not unlike Hitler's. "You see the Untersberg over there," the owner pointed out to Speer. "It is no accident that I have my residence opposite it."

Thanks to a mechanism similar to one Mies van der Rohe devised for his Tugendhat house of 1928–1930 in Brno, Czechoslovakia (built for a wealthy Jewish family), this immense

own, & he said Frau Troost wanted to insist on having *three* windows.

The rest of the Berghof was much less dramatic. Troost's decor included such folksy touches as a knotty pine dining room, tile-clad corner stoves, and wooden Bavarian-style chairs with heart-shaped cutouts.

Troost's firm received no further large-scale architectural commissions from the Nazis after the Munich art gallery, but Hitler continued to use her for personal commissions including the design of a Nymphenburg porcelain dinner service, Zwiesel glassware, and silver cutlery bearing his AH monogram, an eagle, and a swastika. Her lavishly illustrated 1938 survey of Nazi architecture, *Das Bauen im Neuen Reich* (Building in the New Reich), which gave pride of place to her late husband's works, was reprinted in multiple editions. During the war she designed military commendation certificates as well as medals inlaid with diamonds looted from Dutch Jews. And though she saved a number of Jewish acquaintances from deporta-

tion, Troost insisted that neither she nor Hitler himself knew anything about the genocide.

Her denazification trial went badly—one German official recorded that "she is and remains a fanatical Nazi follower"—and when put under house arrest she bridled at the indignity of being guarded by *US-Negern*—African-American soldiers. The repellent Gerdy, who endlessly invoked Brahms, Kant, and other touchstones of German high culture, went to her grave unrepentant in 2003, less than two years shy of her centenary.

### 3.

After Albert Speer spent twenty years in prison for crimes against humanity, this Alberich of architecture published three books unsurpassed in their dissembling, distortion, and deviousness. His *Erinnerungen* (1969) was issued in the US as *Inside the Third Reich* and spent thirty weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. *Spandauer Tagebücher* (1975), translated as *Spandau: The Secret Diaries*, became another best seller. And *Der Sklavenstaat: Meine Auseinandersetzungen mit der SS* (1981) appeared in English as *The Slave State: Heinrich Himmler's Masterplan for SS Supremacy*.

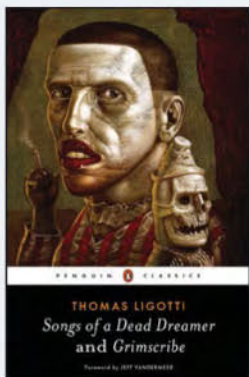
As Speer assiduously tried to recast his public image—from heinous war criminal to overambitious architect who couldn't resist the temptation of building on an unprecedented scale—he found an avid coprofessional advocate in Léon Krier, the Luxembourg-born Classical-revival architect best known for designing Poundbury, the neo-traditional new town in Dorset begun in 1988 by Prince Charles. In 1985 Krier caused a stir by publishing *Albert Speer: Architecture, 1932–1942*, a deluxe monograph in which he asserts that his subject would be esteemed as one of the twentieth century's greatest architects and urban planners were it not for his regrettable political associations—a notion as aesthetically preposterous as it is morally indefensible.

Apart from Krier's fellow ultraconservative contrarians, few have endorsed his revisionist reassessment. A more kindly view of Speer's accomplishments is unlikely ever to prevail after the publication of the British-Canadian historian Martin Kitchen's brilliant and devastating new biography of this manipulative monster. With a mountain of new research gleaned from sources previously unavailable, overlooked, or disregarded, Kitchen lays out a case so airtight that one marvels anew how Speer survived the Nuremberg trials with his neck intact, given that ten of his codefendants were hanged for their misdeeds (some arguably on a smaller scale than his own).

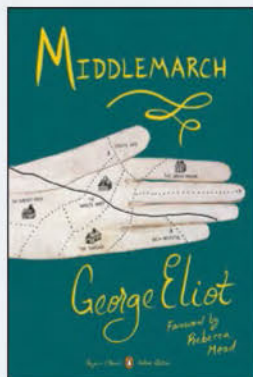
Instead, in the Spandau fortress he gardened for up to six hours a day and inveigled employees to smuggle in rare Bordeaux, foie gras, and caviar, and smuggle out manuscripts and directives to his best friend and business manager. In 1966 he exited a rich man, his war-profiteering fortune amazingly intact. As an international celebrity author he further cashed in on his notoriety during the remaining fifteen years of freedom he highly enjoyed. This Faustian figure died of a stroke at seventy-six in London, where he had gone for a BBC-TV interview, after a midday



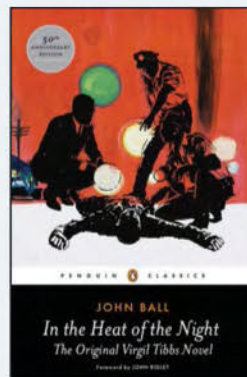
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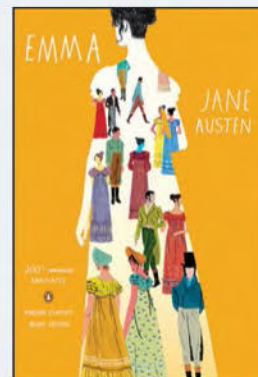
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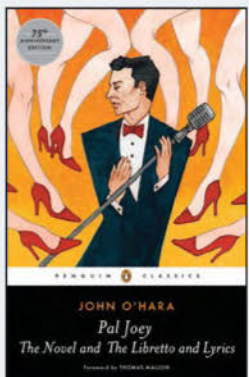
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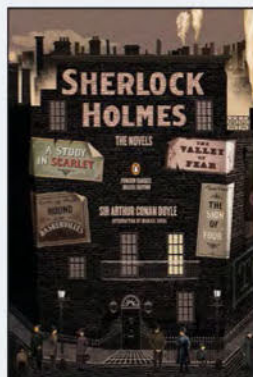
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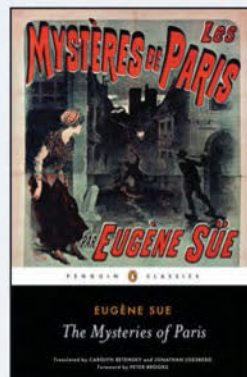
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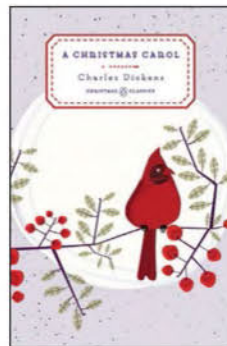


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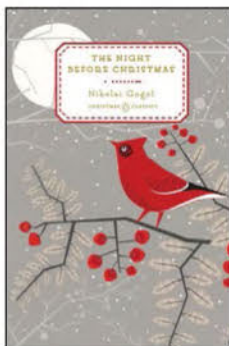
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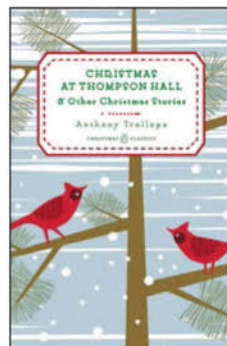
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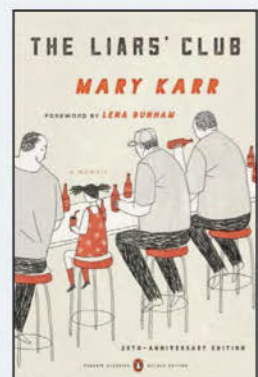
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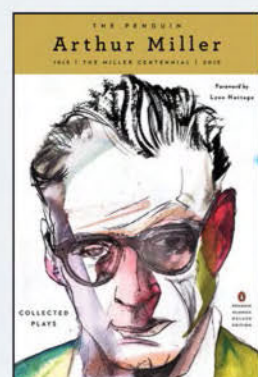
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# eyes

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rendezvous at his hotel with a beautiful young woman.

Berthold Konrad Hermann Albert Speer was born in Mannheim in 1905, the son of an architect who made no pretense of his love for money and a grasping, social-climbing mother. It is indicative of Kitchen's painstaking scholarship that he accepts nothing his incorrigibly mendacious subject said at face value, not even Speer's account of his own birth. Although he claimed it took place amid the dramatic conjunction of a thunderstorm and noonday bells pealing from an adjacent church, the author found that the church in question was not built until the boy was six, and furthermore it rained in Mannheim that day only later in the afternoon. Thereafter the author catches him in dozens of lies, big and small, throughout this harrowing account.

Speer studied architecture at what is now the Technical University in Berlin under Heinrich Tessenow, whose architecture was characterized by what Eduard Sekler called an “unassuming, rather charming simplicity... [that] had its roots in the same soil where folklore and classicism grew side by side.” Tempting as it may be to see Speer's Third Reich fever dreams as inflated versions of Tessenow, he utterly lacked his teacher's delicate touch, gift for faultless proportions, and sense of humane scale. An architectural third-rater by any measure, Speer would have languished at some back-office drafting table had he not joined the Nazi Party in 1931. Such were his networking skills that a year later he was asked to refurbish the party's Berlin headquarters, and within months of Hitler's takeover he improvised a stunning scheme that secured his place in the Nazi hierarchy.

The annual party convocation in Nuremberg, held on campgrounds outside the city, took on added importance once Hitler gained political legitimacy. But before Speer was able to execute his Brobdingnagian stadium of 1935–1937 he had to come up with a suitably impressive interim solution. In 1933 he requisitioned 152 anti-aircraft searchlights from the Luftwaffe, placed them around the perimeter of the assembly grounds, pointed them upward, and after nightfall created the *Lichtdom* (cathedral of light), a mesmerizing spectacle in which columns of icy illumination seemed to rise into infinity, or, alternatively, formed the bars of a gargantuan cage. This coup de théâtre was such a triumph that the kliegs remained after the stadium was completed. (New York City's Tribute in Light, the yearly commemoration of the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers, employs beacons trained skyward in an identical manner, though few have emphasized the concept's unfortunate provenance.)

Speer first attracted international attention with his German pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris, where officials limited the height of his building—a granite shoebox with a squared-off frontal tower—at 177 feet so as not to overpower the USSR pavilion, designed by Stalin's favorite architect, Boris Iofan, directly across the exposition's central esplanade. Not to be outdone, Speer added a thirty-foot-high gilded eagle atop his composition, which, juxtaposed against the Soviet building's seventy-eight-foot-high stainless steel roof sculpture of workers brandishing a hammer and a sickle, presented a prophetic architectural preview of the coming cataclysm.

Hitler planned to rename Berlin “Germania” after he won the war and wanted, by 1950, to carry out Speer's mammoth design to transform the city and make it the capital not only of the Third Reich but of the world itself. Any doubts about the architect's irredeemable vileness are countered by Kitchen's methodical exposition of precisely how Speer persisted with this insane project even after the war started. The quick prosecution of the blitzkrieg against Norway, Denmark, the Low Countries, and France prompted euphoric Nazi expectations that this would be a short campaign, whereupon Speer began Germania in earnest. He would brook no opposition, and when the subordinates of a top Hitler henchman annoyed him he threatened, “If your three protégés can't shut their traps, I'll order their houses to be demolished,” hardly the harshest punishment he meted out.

Previously Speer had been constrained by law from evicting tenants in apartment houses that would have to be torn down to make way for his grand axes of triumphal avenues terminating at his colossal Great Hall, which if built would have been the world's largest domed structure, equal to a seventy-two-story skyscraper. (Léon Krier, in one of his most astounding passages, writes of this monstrosity that “a dome, however large, is never oppressive; it has something of the archetypally benevolent. Speer's Great Hall would have been a monument of promise, not of oppression.”)

Legal niceties were now dispensed with, despite objections from a few brave civic officials, and as Kitchen documents, Jews were evicted from their homes and sent to concentration camps specifically to free real estate for Speer's requirements, a process entrusted to Adolf Eichmann before he hit his fully murderous stride elsewhere. Furthermore, so insatiable was Speer's need for gigatons of stone to encase Germania's new buildings that he abetted the enslavement of Jews

and foreign captives to mine quarries until they dropped. When Speer was confronted about the cruelty of this and other deadly servitude, he breezily replied, “The Yids got used to making bricks while in Egyptian captivity.”

As the war went on, Speer was given huge responsibilities for supervising the German war machine, for which he evaded responsibility at Nuremberg. Kitchen writes:

He was very fortunate that it was not brought to the court's attention that Mittelbau-Dora, the notorious underground factory where the V2 rockets were built and where thousands died due to the appalling conditions, was part of Speer's armaments empire. Nor was any mention made of his complicity with Himmler's policy of deliberately working prisoners to death.

At its dark heart, the architecture of Albert Speer—and by extension that of Nazi construction in general—promoted control through intimidation. This was the explicit purpose, not a random by-product, of official design in the Third Reich. The direct reflection of a society's values in what it builds, always a fundamental aspect of architecture, has never been clearer in the entire history of this art form.

Behind Hitler's desk in his ridiculously bloated Berlin Chancellery office—where he was never photographed because its stupendous scale would have made him look like a dwarf—hung a partly unsheathed sword. He gleefully said it reminded him of Siegfried's line from the eponymous Wagner music drama, “*Hier soll ich das Fürchten lernen?*” (Is this where I should learn fear?) Even before visitors reached the dictator's chamber they were subjected to an angst-inducing march along extended corridors paved with intentionally slippery marble to put them off balance.

The fiasco of Operation Barbarossa—the disastrous German invasion of Russia named after the conqueror supposedly waiting to be awakened within view of Hitler's Berchtesgaden picture window—forced Speer to abandon his work on Germania and redirect his organizational talents as minister of armaments and war production, a position that allowed him to prosper obscenely through all sorts of corrupt schemes. At the Nuremberg trials, one of the rare officials not taken in by his insidious charm and ersatz penitence was a British army major, Airey Neave, who on reflection deemed Speer “more beguiling and dangerous than Hitler.” Martin Kitchen's masterful if profoundly depressing biography makes that undeceived observation all the more plausible. □

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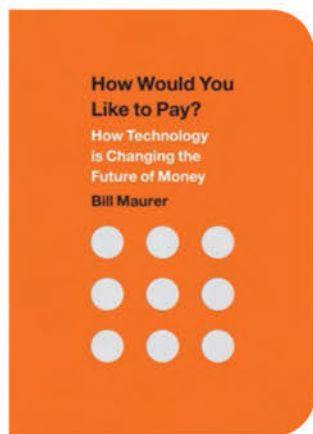
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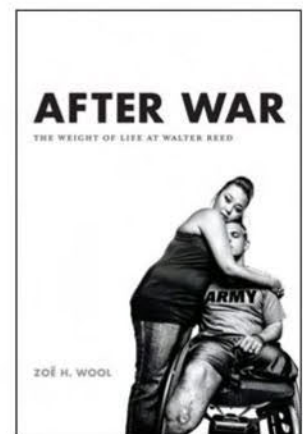
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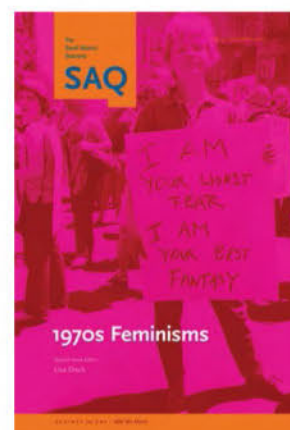
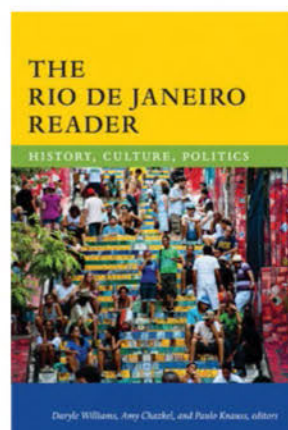
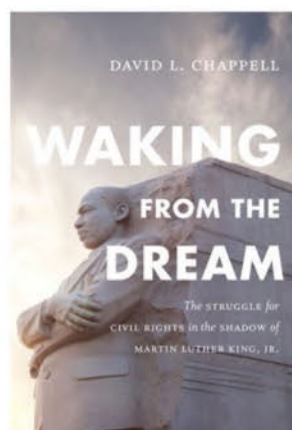
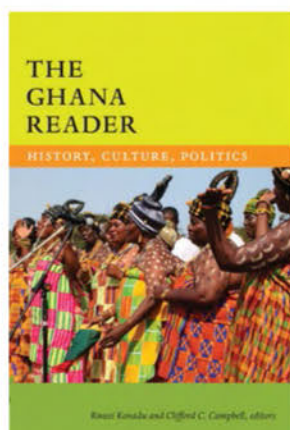
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# Macbeth Without Evil

Andrew O'Hagan

## Macbeth

a film directed by Justin Kurzel

The weird sisters in *Macbeth* are never delicate in their cooking. Only in Roman Polanski's film adaptation of 1971 do they take pains over the hell-broth, though the lingering shots might have something to do with their nakedness (the film was produced by Hugh Hefner) as opposed to their collective Julia Child tendencies. While the witches go about their business, the eye of newt and the toe of frog appear fresh from that morning's market, while the wool of bat and tongue of dog are dropped into the brew with the kind of culinary panache that would, one suspects, make the hags quite welcome on the Food Channel. One ought to remember that in Shakespeare's time, as Dr. Johnson reminds us, it was not merely impolite but a criminal act not to believe in witches, and any production of the play worth its salt—or its root of hemlock—must cleave to the diabolical, allowing human motivation to be lost and found in the mists of enchantment.

In 1599, James VI of Scotland—soon to be James I of England—published his book *Daemonologie*. Not only had the king been a witness to the North Berwick witch trials less than a decade before, but he had interrogated several of the East Lothian residents who were indicted, before seeing them tortured until they confessed, then executed at Edinburgh Castle. In 1606, when Shakespeare is believed to have written the play, witchcraft was in the air, and so was regicide—the Gunpowder Plot had been foiled only months before, and it was less than twenty years since the beheading of James's mother, Mary, Queen of Scots.

And yet film productions of *Macbeth* have tended not to linger on the magic, with directors more interested in getting down to the hurly-burly of real-time ambition and bloodletting. Polanski's witches, as was noted at the time, were a kind of Manson family manqué, it being only two years since the murder in Beverly Hills of the director's pregnant wife, along with some of their friends. The violence in that film seems meaningless. But the violence in the play is always there to excite what A.C. Bradley called “supernatural alarm”: monarchs and children and loyal swains are murdered for their goodness, or for revenge, or due to the exigency of “vaulting ambition,” but Shakespeare was rigorous in his animation of a universe where fate and prediction are cooked up by spirits, the kinds of spirits who tend to come alive in the dark hollows of the human mind.

The newest *Macbeth* adaptation to reach the screen is directed by Justin Kurzel, a man who believes in mists but doesn't believe in ghosts. This is a fair predicament, except that we quickly learn that Kurzel wants *Macbeth* to be a love story, when some of us have grown up thinking it the greatest hate story ever written. Is it for love of her husband that Lady Macbeth bends Macbeth's mind out of shape and presses him to murder a king who has just covered them in glory? Is it love for his wife that

steals Macbeth's decency, his humanity, his loyalty, and turns him into a serial killer? If so, it is a play not merely about valiance thwarted by love, or of virtue obliterated by sex, but a drama of how obedience to the workings of infatuation can drive you mad. This might have been considered an ample theme for a genius, but I'm afraid, when Kurzel told an audience at the Cannes Film Festival last May that this is “a beautiful, tragic love story,” he meant that it is a film about a pair of star-crossed lovers hitting a bit of a rough patch.

Is this a self-help text I see before me? Were it not for the outdoorsy set-

evil,” their eyes say. And that is the hallmark of the film: the characters are shown not only to be in pain, but are being torn apart by an ill fortune beyond their control.

The film has self-pity in abundance, but no poetry. Fassbender in particular has no feel for the rhythm, the music, or the flexibility of Shakespeare's verse, tending to run his lines together as if it was all just antic prose. Perhaps subconsciously, he puts pressure on the lines to express constant anguish as opposed to malice aforethought. When he tells his wife, before killing Duncan, “We shall proceed no further in this busi-



Michael Fassbender as Macbeth in Justin Kurzel's adaptation of *Macbeth*

ness,” it is not a line that springs from his having seen the folly of the idea, or from an upsurge of common decency suddenly mocking his crazed ambition. It comes, rather, like a weak underscoring of his own pitiable condition in life. Fassbender gives Macbeth less than his due mindfulness, and it flattens everything he says into a kind of whine. He has the inevitable flashbacks to the battle scenes and looks wan with the need to think. When he approaches Duncan's bed to kill him, he trails his own put-upon condition into the tent. Shakespeare shows us none of this, but the film glories in the knife frenzy.

It is Scotland in the year 1040. In a beautiful, deep glen surrounded by peaks and swirling mist, we open on a dead baby lying in the heather. Kneeling before the baby is its weeping mother, Lady Macbeth (Marion Cotillard), whose brave husband steps forward to put weathered coins on the child's eyes. The witches, when we meet them, are like ordinary girls, speaking their lines conversationally, as if telling us the way to Inverness. Macbeth (Michael Fassbender) is soon on the battlefield, covered in blue wode, doing his best for king and country, with the worthy Banquo (Paddy Considine) at his side. They both come home to glory and Macbeth continues to the family tent, to receive his curse. His wife is a grieving person who wants to cause more grief, and soon, so does he. Cotillard plays it for softness and for pity: who could not feel for a woman so suddenly childless? Meanwhile, Fassbender speaks post-traumatically and sufferingly throughout. “We are not

The language is everything, but it's worth remembering that Akira Kurosawa made a film masterpiece without it, knowing that the sublime problems of character could survive the translation. *Throne of Blood* (1957) is set in sixteenth-century Japan, and Asaji—the Lady Macbeth figure—counsels treason with a Kabuki face. “You must strike first if you do not wish to be killed,” she says. “Without ambition a man is not a man.” There is nothing of the mighty pentameter in this, yet it does the job, because Kurosawa's tragedy evokes by silence and by the rhythm of his shots the interior *danse macabre*.

The new *Macbeth* is like a great many cinema adaptations of recent years: it glosses Shakespeare and makes a play of the less difficult lines and images, and generally it Shakespearianizes the talk, but it often fails to realize the subtleties that drive the characters. For instance, in Act 2, Scene 3 of the play, when the castle is in an uproar at the discovery of Duncan's murder, Lady

Macbeth assumes a shocked disposition at the news. “What, in our house?” she says. Banquo hears the line for what it is, a selfish, subtly inappropriate remark at the death of the monarch. “Too cruel any where,” he replies.

In that moment, Lady Macbeth shows the true scale of her depravity, not merely by pretending she didn't know how the king came to be murdered—in the gruesome depth of her feigning she reveals her vanity too. In his notes on the play, the eighteenth-century churchman and critic William Warburton fixes on this moment. “This is very fine,” he says.

Had she been innocent, nothing but the murder itself, and not any of its aggravating circumstances, would naturally have affected her. As it was, her business was to appear highly disordered at the news. Therefore, like one who has her thoughts about her, she seeks for an aggravating circumstance, that might be supposed to affect her personally; not considering, that by placing it there, she discovered rather a concern for herself than for the king.

Meanwhile, her husband is genuinely “laboring under the horrors of the recent murder,” and his anguish and sorrow, on that account alone, seem genuine to the audience. Kurzel's film cuts the lines entirely and instead we linger awhile longer among the gore.\* Fassbender and Cotillard are united in self-pity and in sexual attraction—which is what a cinema audience wants for its nickel—but at no point might we gasp at the immoral chasm they are opening up around themselves.

Shakespeare is always various, always invested in two-mindedness, and never knowingly blunt in showing his characters' motivations. Yet films often are, and arguably they must be in order to pull in today's audience. Kurzel's film therefore invests deeply in atmospherics and in the mechanics of brutality—a brew of clichés lifted from historical dramas and *Game of Thrones*—while avoiding the psychological infiltrations that make the play so great. The urge in the film is always toward a modern explanation of what makes good people do bad things, thus the post-traumatic stress disorder, thus the feelingful depictions of Lady Macbeth with her lost child. We see her weep while her husband burns Macduff's children at the stake, but not for any evil she has done, or even at any evil Macbeth is doing now. We must assume that the water in Cotillard's eyes is prompted by the innocent state of children generally and the memory of her own dear child.

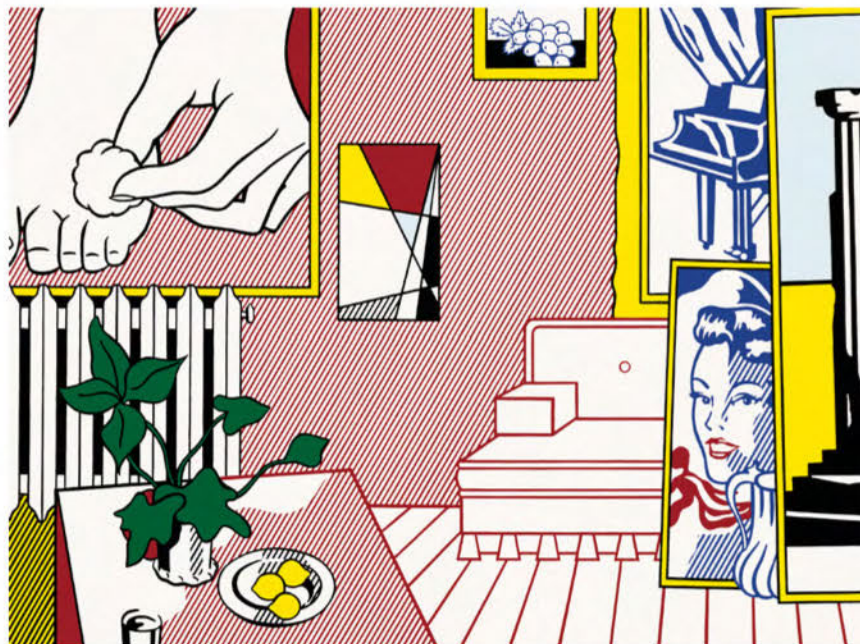
When she sits alone in her tent and rubs her hands, saying “out, damned spot,” it is not the famous sleepwalking

\*In Polanski's film of the play, Francesca Annis, as Lady Macbeth, speaks the line beautifully, like a housewife who cares more for her reputation as the keeper of a clean house than that an anointed king has just been stabbed to death.



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scene anymore, not a scene where she is haunted by the blood on her hands and by the scale of her murderous intent, but is now a mourning scene where she is raised out of calumny into a blameless suffering, an apparition of her dead baby suddenly appearing before her on the bare ground. This is not modern ethics, necessarily, but it is modern storytelling, in which characters must be more “likable” or “sympathetic” in order to be real to us, or to matter. The

unknowability of evil is dimmed in the candle-glow of a generalized empathy in which none of us is truly guilty. Troubled veterans and grieving women beware: your ambition may be ugly, but it is merely evidence of a virtuous nature that has learned how to suffer.

*Macbeth* is the tragedy of a brave man’s relapse into the worst parts of his nature, a program for death so personal and so uncanny that only the supernatural could countenance it. Samuel

Taylor Coleridge caught it the right way when he said that “Macbeth’s language is the grave utterance of the very heart, conscience-sick, even to the last faintings of moral death.” There is no hope for Macbeth once it has started, and the play animates the many deaths of him and his queen with steady grace and terrible plausibility. Even Orson Welles, in his otherwise shrill, pantomimic film of 1948, appeared to know from the start that he was dealing with

walking shadows, men and women who drain all blood and all goodness away in the attempt to be more than that. The present film knows nothing of the sort, but it puts itself in line with a contemporary assumption that water is thicker than blood, that redemption is larger than death, that effort is greater than deed, and that behind every bad person is a good person crying to get out, a beautiful self behind the blades who is merely in need of some help. □

# French Love for Sale

Ian Buruma

## Splendours and Miseries: Images of Prostitution in France, 1850–1910

an exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay, Paris, September 22, 2015–January 17, 2016; and the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, February 19–June 19, 2016. Catalog of the exhibition by Guy Cogeval and others. Paris: Musée d’Orsay/Flammarion, 307 pp., \$55.00

Great cities have often been compared to whores. The Whore of Babylon, mentioned in the Book of Revelation, may have been a metaphor for imperial Rome, or possibly Jerusalem. Juvenal’s satirical poem about Rome, written at the end of the first century AD, conjures up the lascivious image of Messalina, Emperor Claudius’s wife, as a symbol of urban depravity. At night, the “whore-empress” made straight for the brothel, “with its stale, warm coverlets,” where “naked, with gilded nipples, she plied her trade....”<sup>1</sup>

The city, in Juvenal’s time as much as our own, was a place where everything, including sex, was traded, where the constant flow of money broke the barriers of race or tribe. The illusion of cultural purity cannot survive in the urban melting pot, hence the ancient strain of native distrust of foreigners. Juvenal’s satire of Rome is filled with two-faced Greeks and grasping Jews, deceitfulness and greed being the twin vices commonly associated with city life.

In 1874, Gustave Moreau did a painting of Messalina, nude except for her rich jewels, groped by a young Tiber fisherman, while a couple of exhausted debauchees lie prone at the feet of a procuress. Like Juvenal, whose poem he knew well, Moreau drew a moral from this scene of what he called “debauchery leading to death.” Except that in this case it wasn’t Rome that stood for terminal decadence, but Paris under Napoleon III’s Second Empire, which had come to an ignominious end four years before.

So the prostitute as an artistic icon is not new. But rarely has she been as obsessively depicted and described, in painting, print, or sculpture, in novels, popular songs, and photographs, as in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century France. As idealized figures of fashion, the courtesans and prostitutes in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Japanese woodblock prints and fiction



Jean Béraud: *The Proposition or The Assignment in the Rue Chateaubriand, circa 1885*

also come to mind. They were almost never as realistically portrayed as in late-nineteenth-century French art, but at least one reason for their prominence was similar to what created the later vogue for *cocottes*, *filles de maisons*, or *horizontales* in France: the shift from aristocratic or feudal customs to the dictates of the marketplace. Prostitution, in its many manifestations, grew exponentially with the rise of the modern city.

The exhibition “Splendours and Miseries: Images of Prostitution in France,

1850–1910” at the Musée d’Orsay is exhaustive—in fact, a little bit too exhaustive; after viewing a dozen pornographic photographs reenacting brothel scenes, you get the point. You don’t need dozens more. The same is true of prints by Felicien Rops, an interesting but minor artist, best viewed in smaller doses. Perhaps because the former Orsay railway station is so vast, shows designed to fill its space have a tendency toward overkill, and run the risk of incoherence.

Still, the exhibition, organized together with the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, is full of wonders, and has

a far more serious purpose than some French critics have acknowledged.<sup>2</sup> It is fascinating to see, for example, how the image of prostitutes changed, not just from artist to artist, but in the course of time. The show is not just about art, but an absorbing illustration of social history.

There is of course no fixed definition of the prostitute. Paid sex ranges from Empress Messalina’s amateur pursuits to the grand Parisian courtesans who sometimes made fortunes by consorting with bankers and monarchs. Were the ballet dancers in Jean Béraud’s painting *Backstage at the Opéra* (1889) prostitutes? We see them being fondled and whispered to by elderly gentlemen, who seem to have no other business hanging around backstage. Underpaid, and sometimes no doubt socially ambitious, many of these dancers were available for a price.

Was the girl returning the gaze of a well-dressed gentleman staring through the window of her lingerie shop in James Tissot’s splendid *The Shop Girl* (1883–1885) a whore? Not strictly speaking, probably. But like ballet dancers and actresses, shop girls were part of a vast army of poor young people who flocked to the big city, where they made do as best they could, often by selling sexual favors. It was indeed the very ambiguity of women and girls prowling the boulevards, serving in brasseries, delivering linen, dancing at the Opéra or in less reputable dance halls that lent drama to much French painting in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Isolde Pludermacher, one of the show’s curators, explained her aim to *Le Figaro*. She wished “to restore for today’s viewers the keys to reading pictures that were more or less explicitly related to prostitution at the time.”<sup>3</sup>

But even if one can read the signs—the saucy look, the unusually heavy makeup, the small pet dog yapping at an exposed ankle under a slightly lifted skirt—a degree of ambiguity often remains. During the Second Empire, lasting from 1852 to 1870, paid sex flourished largely behind the doors of brothels called *maisons closes*. As Richard Thomson points out in his catalog essay, “a system intended to be

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Harry Bellet’s attack on the show, “Les œuvres érotiques, ‘blockbusters’ des musées parisiens,” *Le Monde*, October 2, 2015.

<sup>3</sup>“*Splendeurs et misères à Orsay: cinq visions de la prostitution*,” *Le Figaro*, September 28, 2015.

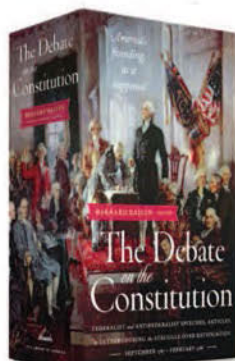


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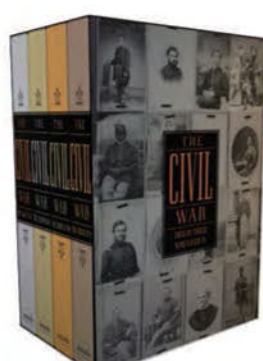
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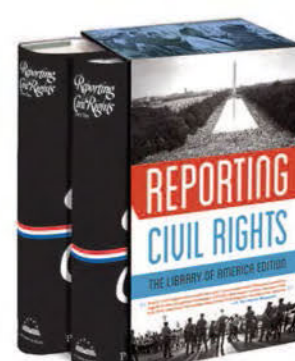
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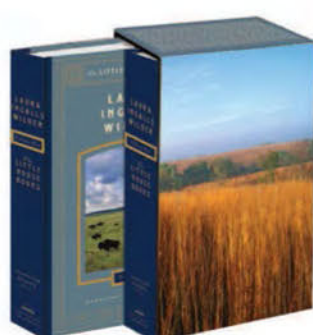
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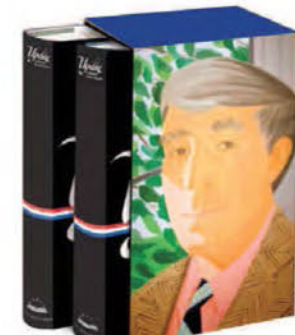
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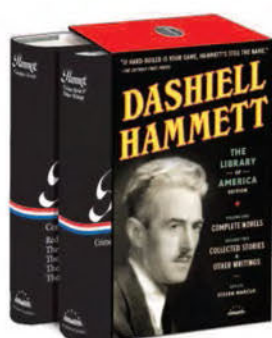
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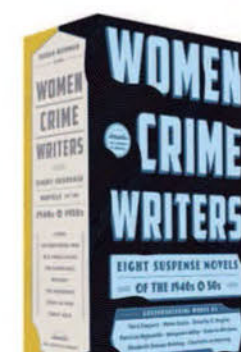
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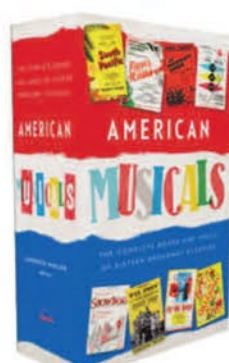
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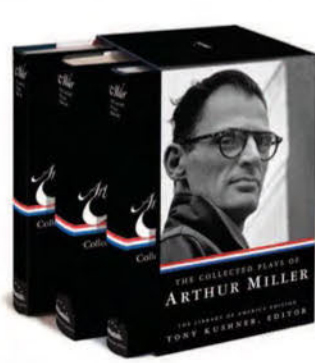
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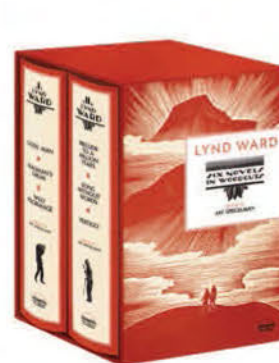
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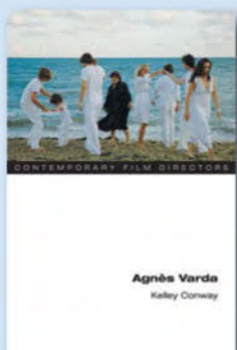
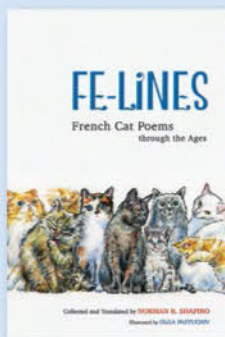
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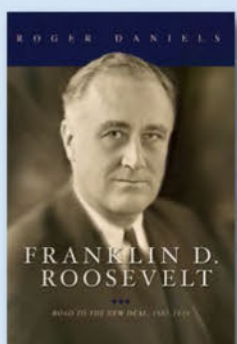
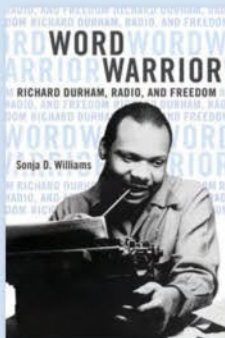
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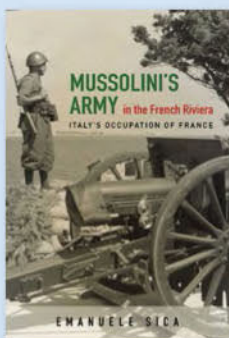
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invisible remained so." Very few artists, unlike in later periods, penetrated those doors, certainly not with the intention of drawing pictures. An exception was Constantin Guys, the artist Baudelaire championed as "the painter of modern life," who did some interesting drawings in ink and watercolors of brothel scenes in the 1850s, some of them cheap dives with sailors and soldiers, some of them catering to a richer clientele.

There was, however, a pronounced taste for the opulent glamour of celebrated courtesans, painted, sometimes in the nude, as simpering Greek goddesses, nymphs, or in several renderings as Mary Magdalene, sometimes penitent, as in Paul Baudry's 1858 picture, sometimes less so. An oil painting done by Alexis-Joseph Perignon in 1866 shows a young woman dressed

courtesans, Manet shows a beautiful young woman in the nude, with embroidered silk slippers, a gold bracelet, and an elegant black choker around her neck. However, unlike Gérôme's air-bushed harem girls or Baudry's slick goddesses, Olympia is a woman of flesh and blood gazing at us rather impudently from her casually made-up bed, being offered a bunch of flowers (from a recently departed lover perhaps) by her black maid, and a cat (*chatte* is pussy in French) at her feet. Olympia oozes sex. This prompted people at the time to see her as a vulgar slut. Upper-class sex, after all, could only be depicted through a gilded haze of myth. That is why Isolde Pludermacher associates Manet's masterpiece with the invention of the modern nude. One sees what she means, even though one might say that



Jean-Louis Forain: The Customer, 1878

as a Renaissance aristocrat. She was actually a soprano named Hortense Schneider, playing the part of one of Bluebeard's wives. When not on stage, Schneider was the mistress of many rich men, including Edward, Prince of Wales (whose antics in Parisian brothels can be guessed at by the display at the exhibition of an elaborate love seat with bronze stirrups). Schneider's success as a courtesan was such that she was known as the *Passage des Princes*.

In any case, in art as often in life, Second Empire prostitution was glossed over or elaborately disguised. One way of showing illicit erotica was to place it in the exotic realm of cultural or historical allegory. Jean-Léon Gérôme's pictures of Oriental harem ladies lounging around communal baths are well known. In this show, we see a famous Greek courtesan posing naked in front of her lecherous judges (*Phryne Before the Areopagus*, 1861), or the even cheesier *Greek Interior* (1850) with dreamy nudes posing languidly on lionskin rugs and plump cushions. Gérôme was a member of the "Neo-Grec" circle of artists who worshiped all things Greek, which in his skillful hands had a tendency to turn into soft porn.

One of the greatest and most famous paintings in the Orsay exhibition is Édouard Manet's *Olympia* of 1863. The picture came as a shock to contemporary critics for a reason that might now be obscure. As with many contemporary paintings of high-end

in terms of realism, Rembrandt and Titian, or indeed Velázquez, had already prepared the way.

Around the time that Manet painted *Olympia*, Paris was being transformed from a medieval warren of often dirt-poor neighborhoods into a modern metropolis with wide, brightly lit boulevards, large squares, fine parks, and the straight rows of uniform gray apartment buildings we now associate with the city. This was undertaken partly as a political measure to make it harder for rebels and revolutionaries to lurk in urban shadows. But Napoleon III was also a great modernizer. Nineteenth-century notions of hygiene played a part. The emperor wanted to "let the sun's vertical rays penetrate everywhere . . . like the light of truth in our hearts." So the prefect Georges-Eugène Haussmann was commissioned to make over Paris, a *grand projet* he ruthlessly carried out. Artists, writers, poets, pamphleteers, singers, and filmmakers have been waxing nostalgic over the Paris that was lost ever since.

In his superb new book, *The Other Paris*, Luc Sante compared Haussmann to twentieth-century political megalomaniacs responsible for such monstrosities as the Bastille Opera and the Arch of La Défense.<sup>4</sup> Sante, too, deplores the way street life has been sucked out of the urban fabric by the destruction of

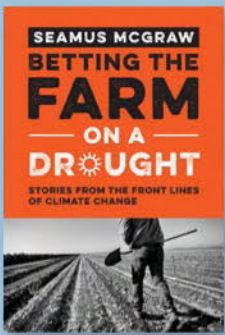
<sup>4</sup>Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015; reviewed in these pages by Robert Darn-ton, November 19, 2015.



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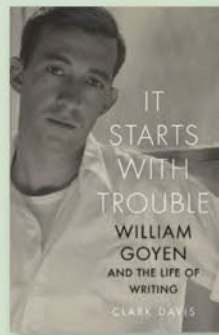
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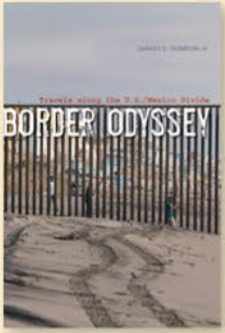
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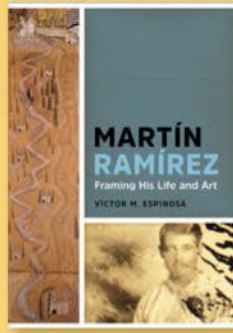
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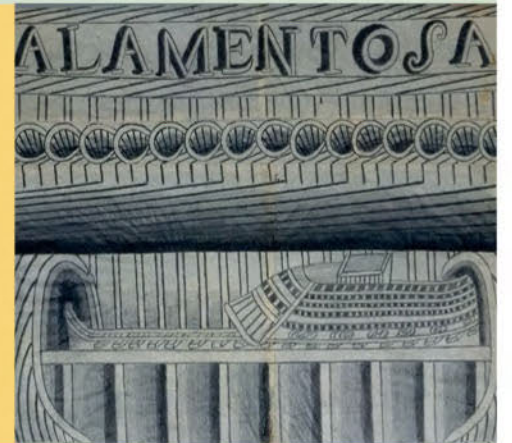
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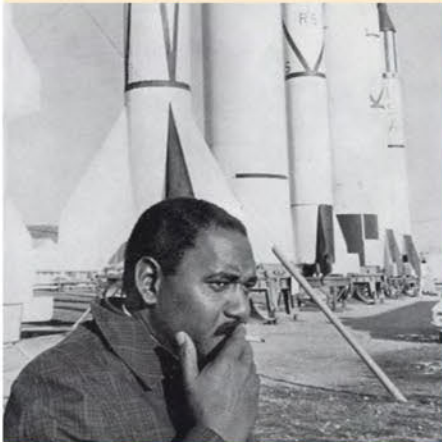
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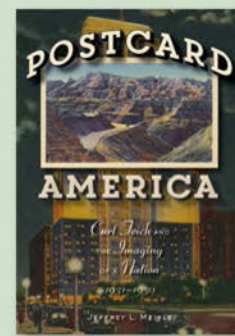
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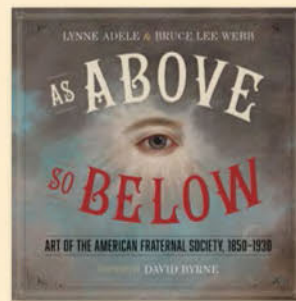
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the old, the marginal, the poor, and the free. He has every reason to.

And yet, if one looks at prostitution, the story is not so straightforward. For it was the same forces of modern life—the expansion of the city, the migration of mostly poor people from the provinces, the spread of the bourgeoisie, the demands of republican egalitarianism—that brought prostitutes, as well as other marginal entertainers and assorted grifters and crooks, out into the open, into the new streets and boulevards, the brasseries and dance halls. More and more women called *insoumises* (free, rebellious) rejected the strictures of organized brothels and went out to find clients by themselves. Fairly swiftly, the romantic fascination for celebrated courtesans made way for a new realism, a fresh artistic gaze at the miseries of paid sex, as well as the often sordid glamour of its representation. Haussmann's Paris had a sexual street theater, full of ambiguity, all of its own, embodied by the crowd, where men and women of all classes mingled, often to disreputable ends.

The Third Republic, founded in 1870, was marked by reformist zeal as well as a great deal of moralism, the two frequently coming together. Authorities tried to crack down, without much success, on unregistered prostitution. Street girls were not allowed to attract attention by wearing flashy clothes that gave away their line of work. Prostitutes (or women suspected as such) were regularly picked up and forced to go through humiliating medical inspections. And moralists also tried to crack down on pictures that showed the sexual trade in an honest way.

In 1877, the Salon rejected Manet's wonderful portrait of Nana, a high-class *cocotte*.<sup>5</sup> There she is, in her silk underwear, powdering her face, her lacy behind facing an appreciative male sitting on a sofa, fully dressed in top hat and evening clothes, a phallic cane jutting from his lap. What everyone knew, of course, is that men—upper-class, bourgeois, and from the lower classes too—frequented prostitutes all the time. One might even say that prostitution was an especially important institution in a morally repressive society. Strict family men were offered a way to let off steam. This was true of eighteenth-century Japan, Victorian London, and nineteenth-century Paris. It produced a degree of hypocrisy that artists loved to undermine.

Stripping away the artificial façade, debunking myths and fantasies, is one of the marks of disenchanted modern art. There are many ways of doing this, one of which is the documentary approach. Jean Béraud's painting *Waiting* (circa 1885) is an interesting example. We see a smartly dressed *insoumise* standing on the corner of an empty Parisian street (rue Chateaubriand), one dainty boot touching the gutter, looking tentatively toward a black-suited man hovering under a street light. A second painting, showing exactly the same spot, also made around 1885, *The Assignment in the Rue Chateaubriand*, shows us another young woman with downcast eyes and a faint smile, being propositioned by a typical bourgeois

male figure in a smart top hat, looking a trifle anxious to settle the deal.

There is something deliberately anti-romantic about these paintings. The imminent or actual transaction is straightforward, businesslike. One doesn't have to be a learned reader of nineteenth-century visual signs to know what is going on. The human encounter is stark, just two people in an empty street. There is nothing especially erotic, let alone salacious. Only the gutter between the woman and her john suggests a squalid side to the meeting.

Another painting by the same artist, *The Boulevard Montmartre, at Night, in Front of the Theatre de Variétés* (circa 1882), reveals a more crowded form of street theater: a young woman on a busy sidewalk glances over her shoulder at a man in a brown overcoat, who looks as if he might be about to follow her, to a nearby hotel perhaps. Another young woman, with her back to us, is conducting some kind of business with a waiter. Wineglasses stand empty on two café tables. The illuminations of the Variety Theater in the background light up the scene.

The looming presence of a theater in the painting is, I think, a clear sign. For prostitution is a form of drama, of performance, even of suspended disbelief. When Zola's Nana puts on her make-up in front of her slavish admirer, Count Muffat, he is "bewitched by the perversion of the powders and the pigments, seized with an inordinate desire for that painted beauty..."

What people buy is not just a person's body, but a fantasy of romance. Brothels were often highly theatrical enterprises. The one favored by the Prince of Wales, Le Chabanais, near the Palais-Royal, is well described in Luc Sante's book. It had rooms in the style of Louis XV, medieval torture chambers, Japanese and Moorish rooms, and even something modeled after a villa in Pompeii. Other establishments offered moving railway carriages, pirate ships, and so on.

In many cases, as I've said, the theater itself, featuring pretty young actresses and ballet dancers, was not so far removed from the brothel. (As a matter of fact, females were banned from the Kabuki stage in seventeenth-century Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka, because so many of them doubled as prostitutes, only to make way for young male actors, who proceeded to do exactly the same thing.)

This meant that pictures of paid sex in the last decades of the nineteenth century were in their way as theatrical as the allegories and Orientalist fantasies of the early Second Empire. But with one big difference: artists like Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, or Jean-Louis Forain did nothing to disguise reality; they showed theater for what it was, a performance, sometimes a highly skillful one, at other times just sad, even pathetic.

Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec did their most interesting work behind the scenes, as it were. Lautrec not only patronized dance halls, where he observed feverish men on the prowl, wiry pimps, and sad-eyed whores, but he was especially good at showing brothel life after the performances were over: tired prostitutes playing cards in their dress-

ing gowns (*The Card Game*, 1893), or women slumped in their chairs staring at nothing in a state of exhaustion (*In the Salon*, 1893).

Lautrec has sometimes been described as coldhearted in his portrayal of low life. He was certainly a caricaturist who didn't flinch from the tawdriest aspects of nocturnal Paris. One contemporary critic described the style as "graveyard comical." But satirical bite, it seems to me, is more often directed at the male clients than at the women. A recurring theme in the work of Lautrec, as well as Degas and others who worked the graveyard comical vein, was the tension between bourgeois respectability and lust. Prostitution, wrote Baudelaire, quoted in Richard Thomson's essay, was "the perfect image of the savagery that lurks in the midst of civilization."



Pablo Picasso: Study for 'Les Femmes d'Alger,' 1907

A stereotypical image of brothel life, done over and over again by Degas, Lautrec, as well as others, such as Forain or Rops, is of one or more whores in the nude, or only in stockings and shoes, posing in front of seated men who are fully dressed in respectable dark suits. In a pastel drawing by Degas, dated around 1876, a naked prostitute is pulling the arm of a prissy-looking gentleman in a three-piece suit and a bowler hat, while three other naked women look on with amused expressions. The picture is called *The Serious Customer*.

Another drawing by Degas, this one made around 1877, shows the back of a naked woman casually combing her blond hair in front of a dressing table with the customary towel and bowl of water. The man watching her, again fully clothed, looks sated, as though he has just eaten a rich meal. In Forain's *The Customer* (1878), a plump man in a black suit and silk top hat leans on his cane, scrutinizing four naked women in colorful stockings striking poses for his inspection. In an extraordinary lithograph by Edvard Munch, *The Alley* (1895), one pale naked woman is surrounded by rows of faceless men in black, as though she were running a gauntlet.

There is no attempt to make the women look beautiful or even especially alluring in these pictures. In drawings by Degas in particular, there is even a distinct air of disgust. This has something to do with the attempt at realism, but is also indicative of how prostitution was seen in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Paid sex was deemed a necessity, its theatricality a subject of endless fascination to artists and titillating to the bourgeoisie, but at the same time something to be feared,

not least because of venereal diseases, and thus to be kept at more than arm's length from respectable society.

This tension was caught most famously in Maupassant's short story "Boule de Suif" (1880). There is an 1884 painting of the same name by Paul-Émile Boutigny, showing the main character of the story, a stout prostitute, nicknamed Boule de Suif, or "Butterball," just after she has submitted to a Prussian officer, who made the tryst a condition for allowing her and a company of highly respectable men and women to leave town in a stagecoach (the story takes place just after France was humiliated in wartime defeat by the rampant Prussians). She cuts an abject figure of shame, with her fellow passengers, in dark clothes and silk hats, turning away as though afraid of contamination.

The hypocrisy of these same reputable burghers who had only hours ago virtually forced a patriotic, rather dignified, and extremely reluctant Boule de Suif to give in to the Prussian so that they might safely get away is described by Maupassant with dark humor. But the story has one brilliant detail that exposes the deeper nature of bourgeois pretenses. As they discuss ways of persuading the prostitute to have sex with the strapping officer, and all that this might entail, the upright women get rather overexcited. That night, writes Maupassant, there was little sleep in the hotel bedrooms where the couples stayed.

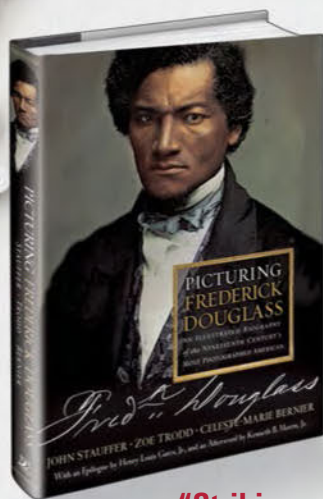
In the art of the early twentieth century, as though presaging extraordinary brutalities soon to come, humor often turned into outright horror, more so even than in pictures by Degas. Caricatures of prostitution became increasingly grotesque. Drawings by Rops, done in the 1880s, already explored the specter of illness and death in prostitution, as in his picture of a skeleton with the mask of a beautiful woman soliciting a male customer in a dark alley (*Human Parody: Street Corner, at Four in the Morning*, 1881). In paintings by Georges Rouault (*Fallen Eve*, 1905, for example), the naked whores look positively monstrous. A red-headed ogre in Maurice de Vlaminck's *At the Bar* (1900) stares at us over a glass of what looks like dried blood.

But by far the most powerful and most disturbing picture of women displaying themselves for the pleasure of men is not actually in the exhibition, but at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The Musée d'Orsay has to make do with a study of the picture, which is already remarkable enough. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) shows five naked women striking strange, jagged poses, like shards of broken glass, with faces like African tribal masks. Picasso preferred to call this painting "My Brothel." The inspiration was a street of whorehouses in Barcelona. Picasso's masterpiece is devoid of glamour, moralizing, or documentary realism. Contemporaries, such as Matisse, were shocked by its harshness. Here is Baudelaire's savagery lurking in the midst of civilization. But it is also an image of terrifying beauty and endless fascination, which is after all the main point of the show. □

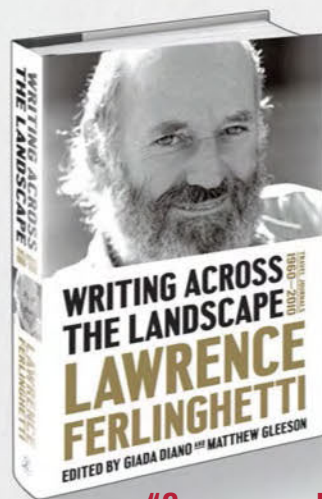
<sup>5</sup>Nana, later the title of Émile Zola's famous novel, published in 1880, was the slang expression for loose women.



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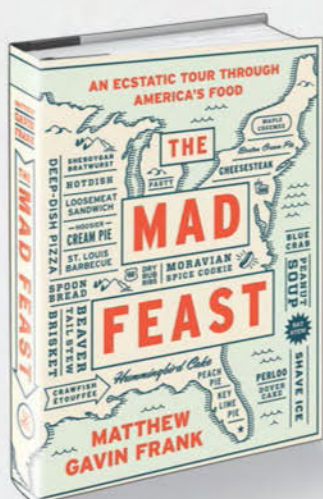
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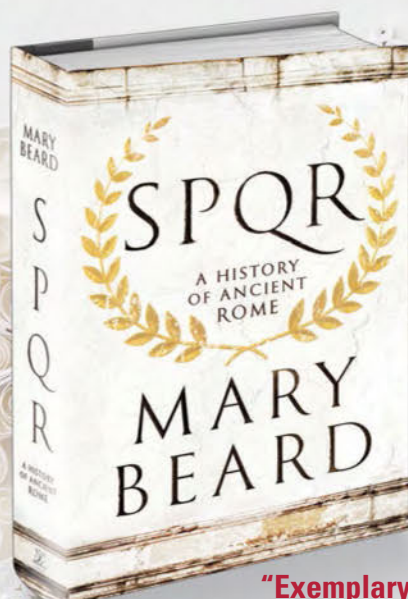
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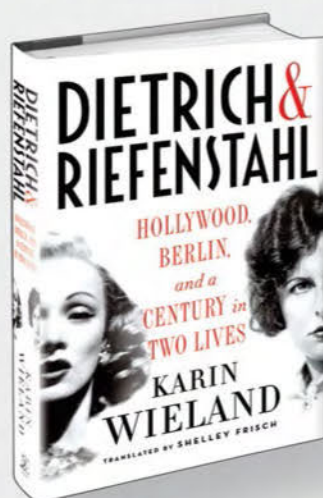
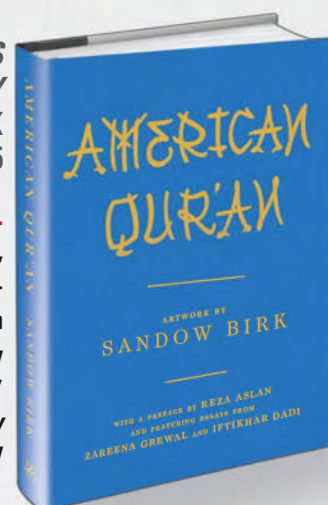


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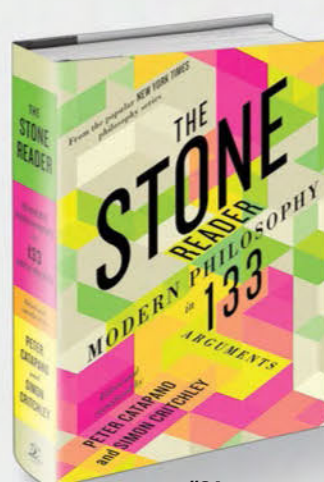
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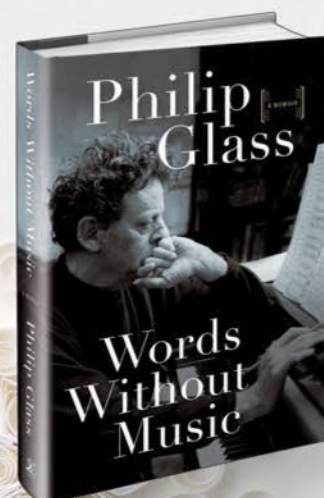
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# Ukraine on the Edge

George Soros

At the beginning of 2015 Ukraine faced a plethora of obstacles and enemies, first and foremost Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was determined to destabilize the country and use the might of the Russian army to crush it. He violated Russian law by using conscripts outside the borders of the country without their written authorization. Accounting for Russian soldiers who were killed and disposing of their bodies caused him a great deal of difficulty and embarrassment.

But he succeeded in defeating the valiant Ukrainian soldiers defending Donetsk airport in January. This led to the agreement called Minsk II, signed on February 11, which was negotiated by Ukraine under military duress. Ukraine had to concede the territorial gains that the separatist enclaves had made since the Minsk I agreement, signed in September 2014. Even so, the Russians kept up the military pressure on the town of Debaltseve, which was evacuated by the Ukrainian army seven days after the signing of Minsk II.

After that, the direct involvement of the Russian army diminished and Putin reverted to waging a proxy war. He also kept the main provisions of the Minsk agreement deliberately vague. Taking advantage of his negotiating position, he insisted that Ukraine fulfill all of Minsk II's requirements before Russia would be obliged to relinquish control of its border with the separatist enclaves. This left the conditions under which those enclaves would hold elections undecided.

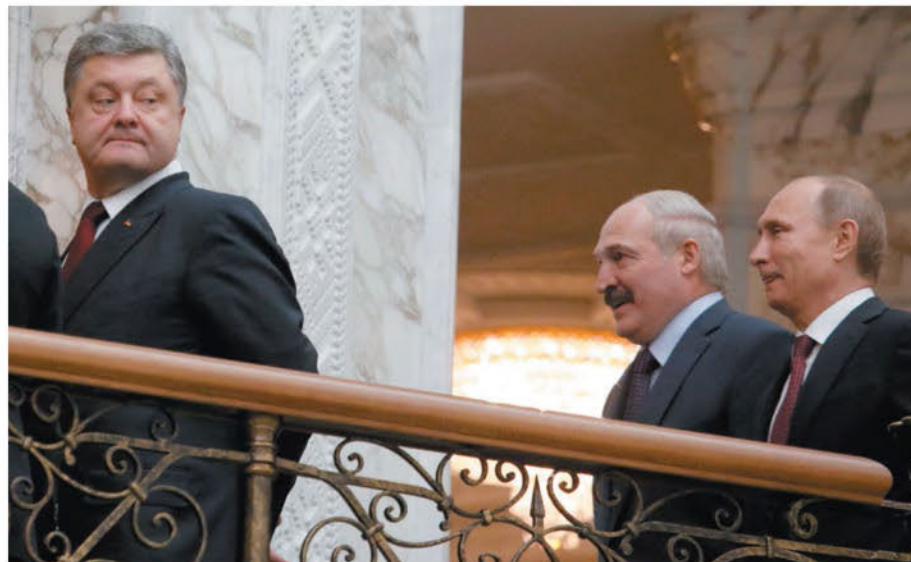
Ukraine insisted that the elections should be held under Ukrainian law, but Putin wanted to create problems for Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko by requiring the Ukrainians to negotiate the conditions for the elections directly with the separatists. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande took a neutral position and eventually put pressure on Ukraine, weakening its negotiating position even further. In the end Putin relented, and negotiations have been taking place in the so-called "Normandy format," a diplomatic group that includes representatives from the Ukrainian, French, German, and Russian governments.

The third obstacle Ukraine encountered was the lack of adequate financial, political, and military support from its allies. By holding Ukraine on a tight financial leash, Germany was in danger of making the same mistake it had made with Greece. Greece had much in common with the old Ukraine: it had an economy dominated by oligarchs and a civil service that exploited the people instead of serving them. To add to Ukraine's woes, at the beginning of 2015 the government's authority was directly challenged by the most powerful oligarch, Igor Kolomoisky—who dominated the financial sector—and by various other oligarchs acting individually or together.

Under these pressures, Ukraine's economy collapsed in the first part of 2015. The exchange rate of the currency plummeted by 50 percent in a few days and the National Bank of Ukraine had to inject large amounts of money to rescue the banking system. But the new

Ukraine proved remarkably resilient; it resisted the forces that wanted to turn it into the old Ukraine.

The climax was reached on February 25. The central bank introduced import controls and raised its interest rate to 30 percent, and President Poroshenko's intervention brought the exchange rate back to a level near the one on which Ukraine's 2015 budget was based. The parliament rushed through a set of radical reforms in record time in order to meet the March 11 deadline set by the International Monetary Fund.



Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, left, with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Minsk, February 2015

In retrospect, that was the turning point. Since then the reform program has gathered momentum and slowly become visible both to the Ukrainian public and to the European authorities. Russia's proxy warfare using Ukrainian separatists did not yield significant territorial gains either in Russia or elsewhere. Oil prices did not recover from the nosedive they took at the end of 2014 and the sanctions against Russia began to bite. The lack of financing prevented Russia's development of new oil fields and the lack of spare parts started to affect production from existing oil fields. For the first time in many years, both the quantity and quality of Russian output declined between the two peak months of June and July.

Putin gradually came to the conclusion that he had not enough to gain in Ukraine to offset the gradual erosion in his support that was bound to occur at home. His attention turned to fresher fields. He managed to surprise the world by intervening militarily in Syria at the end of September. Whether he is successful in the long run or not, he has certainly taken advantage of his ability to make the first move in an international military confrontation and to regain momentum in the short term.

These developments deserve to be recognized as a victory for the new Ukraine. Merely to have survived against overwhelming odds counts as an accomplishment. The Minsk agreement is here to stay, even if it cannot be fully implemented in the original time frame, which called for a final agreement by the end of 2015. Indeed, the timetable was extended by the mutual agreement of all participants into 2016. Whether it is ever fully implemented or not, Putin will not be in a position to re-

vert to large-scale warfare with Ukraine in the foreseeable future. This fulfills the first condition of a winning strategy: a lasting cease-fire. To drive that strategy home, Ukraine's allies ought to take full advantage of Putin's preoccupation with his engagement elsewhere and refocus their attention on Ukraine.

Unfortunately, the people and leadership of Europe are also distracted by other problems, the refugee crisis and the wave of terrorist attacks in Paris foremost among them. As a firm believer in the original concept that led to

the formation of the European Union, I share these concerns. My foundations and I personally are as deeply involved in helping the refugees as we are in helping the new Ukraine. We have developed a comprehensive asylum policy for the European Union that is under active consideration by the authorities. So I feel I am in a strong position to remind Europe of the importance of the new Ukraine. Europe is badly in need of a success and Ukraine can provide one.

I published what I called a "winning strategy" for Ukraine in February 2015 and updated it in October.\* That strategy called for a robust commitment from the West "to do whatever it takes" to help the new Ukraine. I should emphasize that the wholehearted commitment I am advocating does not give the Ukrainian people or government any kind of carte blanche; it is contingent on the implementation of radical reforms.

To remind the reader, my strategy was predicated on reactivating and enlarging the Macro-Financial Assistance program, which has already been used by the European Commission to finance its contribution to the IMF program. That would open the way to the crucial step: a wholehearted commitment by the European Union to help Ukraine not just to survive but to flourish and become an attractive destination for investment. The new date for announcing that commitment is the end of January 2016, when the existing sanctions against Russia expire.

\*See "A New Policy to Rescue Ukraine," *The New York Review*, February 5, 2015, and "Ukraine and Europe: What Should Be Done," *The New York Review*, October 8, 2015.

The central point of my strategy is that the European sanctions against Russia have to be matched by a wholehearted commitment to Ukraine. Sanctions are a necessary evil: necessary because Russia cannot be allowed to replace the rule of law with the rule of force; evil because sanctions hurt everyone—both those on whom they are imposed and, indirectly, also those who impose them.

Putin has developed a very effective political story to defend himself against the sanctions. He claims that all of Russia's economic and political difficulties are due to the hostility of the Western powers, who want to deny Russia its rightful place in the world. Russia, in his view, is the victim of their aggression. Putin's argument appeals to the patriotism of Russian citizens and asks them to put up with the hardships that the sanctions cause. The hardships—which include financial instability and shortages—actually reinforce his argument. The only way to prove Putin wrong is by establishing a better balance between sanctions against Russia and large-scale support for Ukraine.

That brings me to the situation I found when I came to Ukraine on November 8. It took me less than a week to realize that the situation is not as promising as I had thought from the outside. The electorate voted very perceptively in the first round of the local elections, held at the end of October. The only populist critic who gained votes was the former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, whose party is formally a part of the ruling coalition; but she did not exceed the vote for President Poroshenko. In effect, the voters endorsed the ruling coalition yet made it clear that they were dissatisfied both with living conditions and with the pace of reforms. Their endorsement has the character of a payment in advance. It is now up to the ruling coalition to live up to the expectations of the public—and that is where the problems lie.

The new Ukraine performed miraculously when it was unified by an outside threat, Putin's implacable hostility. Now that Putin is preoccupied with Syria, that danger has diminished. After years of hardship and sacrifice, people are eager to relax and pursue their personal or political interests. This is opening up fault lines that were previously held together by the pressure emanating from Russia. I see a real possibility that the objective that Putin could not achieve by military means may fall into his lap as a result of a lasting cease-fire.

The ruling coalition has very little choice. The country cannot afford either new national elections or a change in the ruling coalition. Both would disrupt the Ukrainian government for several months and the country faces a fiscal emergency. It has not met the conditions imposed by the IMF and it will not receive the next installments of payments until it does so. Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk has become very unpopular and his party did not participate in the local elections. Yet President Poroshenko cannot afford to replace him because of the large voting bloc Yatsenyuk controls.

The only way forward is for President Poroshenko to commit himself to

Grigory Dukor/Reuters



continued cooperation with the prime minister and jointly persuade the parliament to pass a budget that will satisfy the IMF. That is what they did at the beginning of 2015 and it worked. The trouble this time is that the president has been reluctant to make that commitment and the ruling coalition is in disarray. Legislation that needs to be passed is either not submitted or defeated in the parliament. Time is running out. The sooner President Poroshenko commits himself to the only course that is open to him, the better the chances that he can regain control of the ruling coalition and avoid a fiscal calamity that could destroy the new Ukraine. He needs to reaffirm his commitment to the radical reforms that the public demands.

Here I will examine the reform process in some detail, taking economic reforms first. The most important project, the linchpin of economic reforms, is the reorganization of the energy sector and particularly the gas sector. It is in very good hands under the current leadership of the state-owned enterprise Naftogaz. What is needed is to move the price of natural gas closer to the market prices prevailing in Europe. This is necessary in order to stop the enormous drain on the national budget represented by the hidden subsidies now provided to the public by Naftogaz; but stopping that drain poses a serious political challenge.

The government introduced a substantial increase in gas prices but many millions of households simply cannot pay them on top of all the other hardships they have had to absorb. They have to be compensated by direct subsidies. Such payments will require an extensive operation, and although the government is fully committed to making it a success, many things can go wrong. Think of all the things that went wrong with the introduction of Obamacare in the United States. The government has recognized that the best way to guard against a possible breakdown is to promise households that their application for a subsidy will be easily approved for the current heating season. This will give the authorities nearly a year to correct any errors.

But that is only the first half of the necessary gas sector reform. As things stand now, households are required to pay not only for the gas they consume but also for the gas that is lost in transmission. This should be corrected. Starting in 2016, the companies that supply the consumers, like the pipeline oligopoly controlled by Dmytro Firtash, should be responsible for the gases that are lost. If they fail to do so, they should go bankrupt and their businesses taken over by more competent operators.

The privatization of the gas and electricity sectors will also be full of pitfalls. There are many rumors about various oligarchs obtaining or reestablishing oligopolies but, paradoxically, I find these rumors reassuring. If I heard them, so did others, and there are enough genuine reformers in the parliament and the government and eventually in the anticorruption agencies to stop them.

There is one major economic reform toward which little progress has been made: tax reform. This is now at the

top of the agenda of the finance minister, Natalie Jaresko, and since I regard her as one of the true reformers, it has become my top priority as well. People need to have some certainty about their future tax liabilities in order to make long-term investments. A tax reform package that removes uncertainty, ensures fairness, and reduces corrupt practices is absolutely necessary.

Currently there are several different tax reform measures being debated in the parliament. I strongly endorse the finance minister's plan, partly because it is the only one that meets the requirements of the IMF. It introduces a uniform flat tax of 20 percent to replace a tax code that is so complex it breeds corruption. But the plan faces an uphill battle. It will add a significant additional burden to the budget of 60 billion hryvnia (about \$3 billion) because the IMF will not recognize the additional revenues it will produce until they materialize. Even the IMF advises against introducing the plan at this late stage but the finance minister insists because she recognizes the public clamor for meaningful reforms.

Reform of the civil service—often both inefficient and corrupt—is second only to tax reform. The first reading of comprehensive legislation to reform the system already took place in April. Both the president and the prime minister must ensure that the final legislation will be passed this year. The European Commission has reserved considerable funds to raise government salaries but predicated payment on the passage of the bill and adoption of a new strategy. As the EU ambassador to Ukraine noted, the EU will support and give assistance “to get the new Ukrainian civil service on its feet.” But the amount of money allocated, reported as ninety million euros, is not enough and there is a fatal flaw in the current design: the salaries of members of the government and parliament are limited to about two hundred euros. This is an invitation for corruption. This is one of the issues on which the president and prime minister need to work together in asserting party discipline and pushing the coalition to act.

Judiciary reform is another priority. An important event occurred on October 23 when the Council of Europe's Venice Commission ignored the appeal of high-level Ukrainian judges to uphold the status quo that conferred immunity on current judges regardless of previous wrongdoings.

Impressively, two fundamental components of judicial reforms were recently introduced by the Ukrainian National Reform Council. They will permit the wholesale reorganization of the judicial system, and open the way to a thorough professional and personal reexamination of the judges. If these measures are approved by the parliament, they will amount to a breakthrough.

I believe that the prime minister and president are close to agreeing on some necessary personnel changes in the Cabinet of Ministers. This will remove the currently prevailing uncertainties and give the reform process new momentum. Both the people and the supporters of the new Ukraine abroad are looking to the president to take charge of the reform process. Having met him, I am hopeful that he is ready to do so and when he acts, the country will follow him. □

—November 16, 2015

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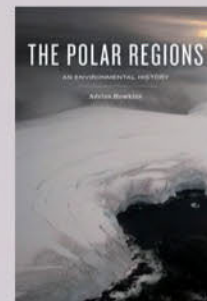
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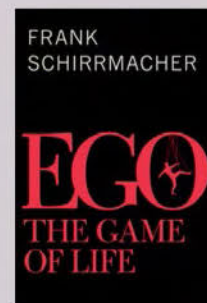
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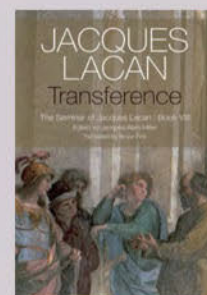


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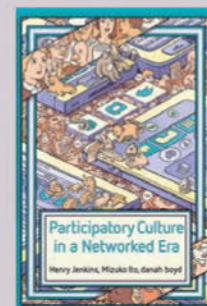
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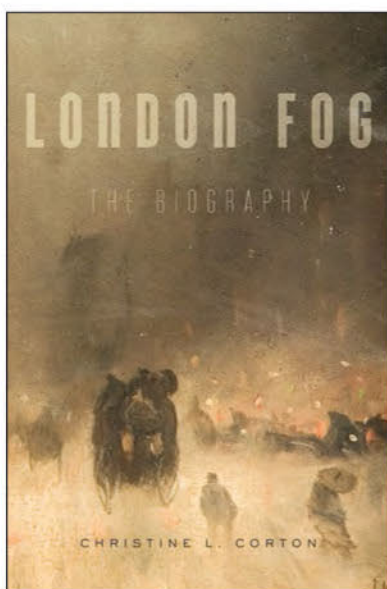
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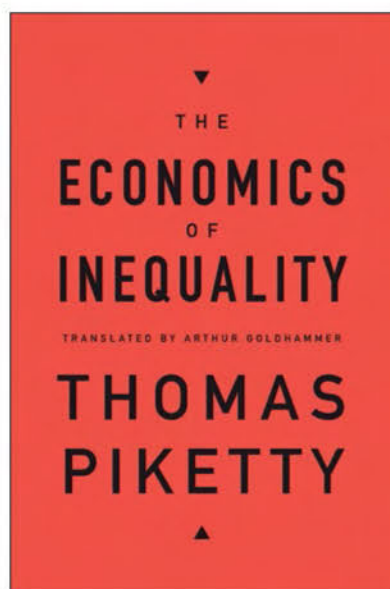
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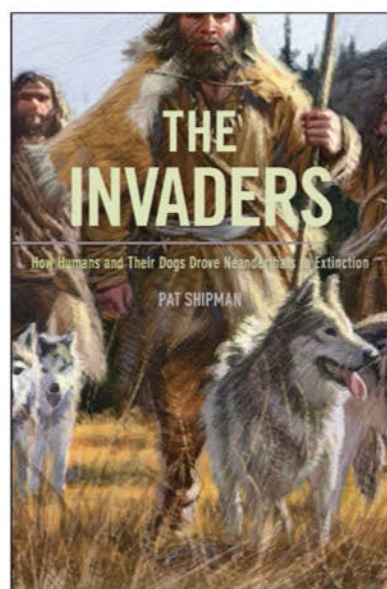
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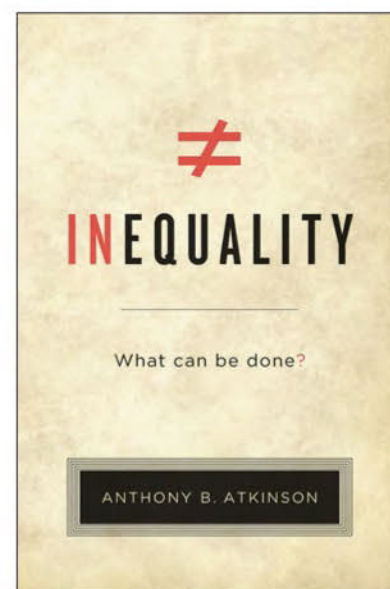


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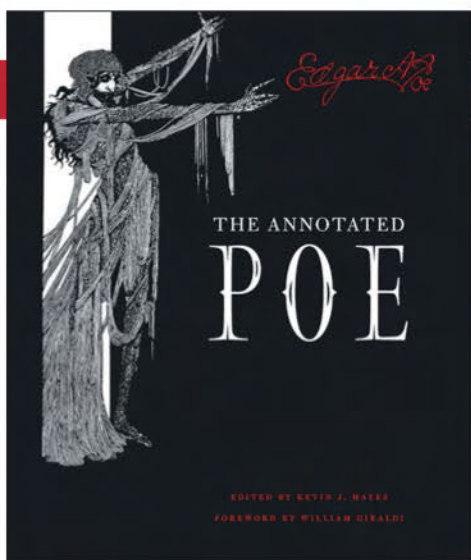
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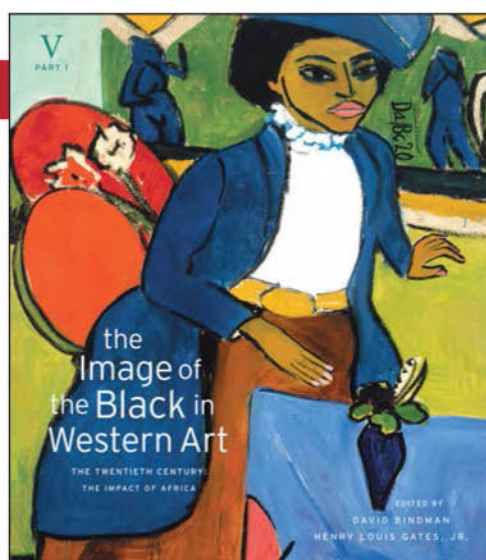
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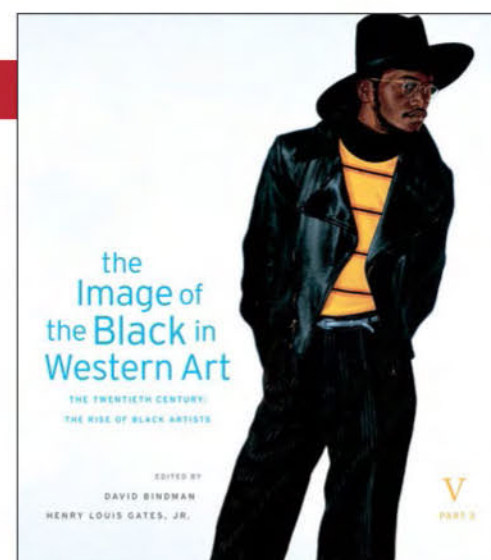
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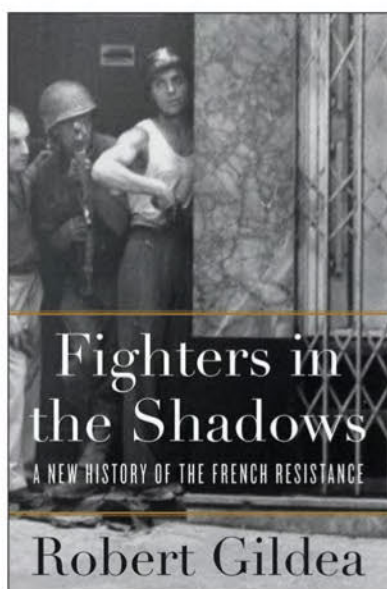
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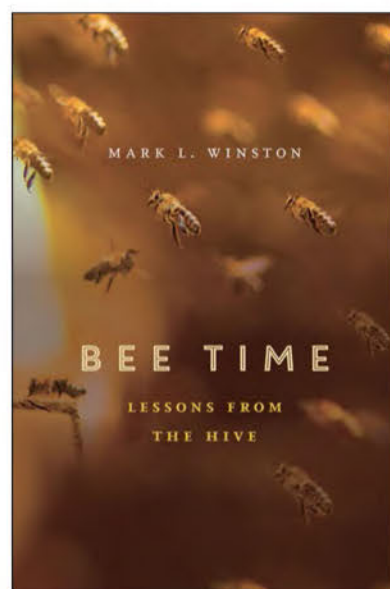
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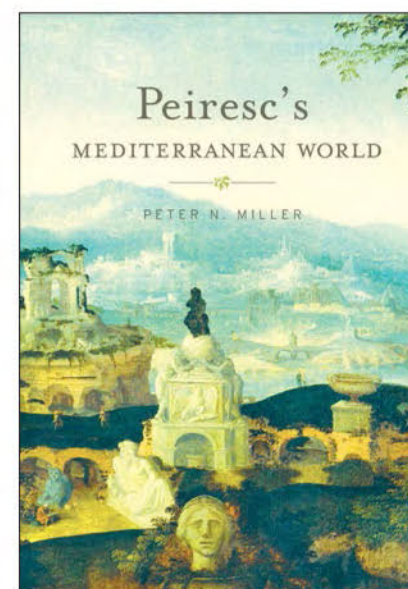
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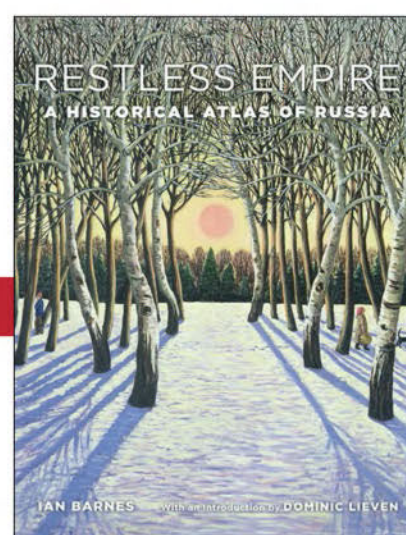
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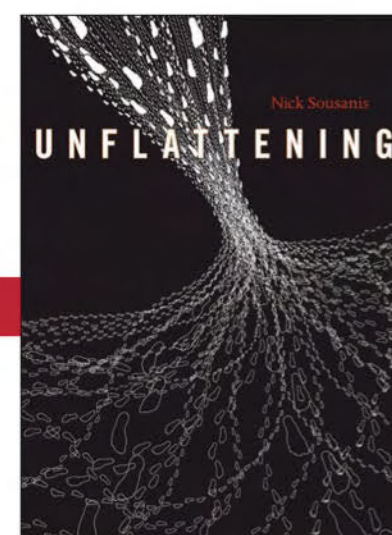
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# She Was Houdini's Greatest Challenge

Cass R. Sunstein

**The Witch of Lime Street: Séance, Seduction, and Houdini in the Spirit World**  
by David Jaher.

Crown, 436 pp., \$28.00

What is the greatest competition in American history? In boxing, you might single out Muhammad Ali against Joe Frazier, or perhaps Jack Dempsey against Gene Tunney. In chess, it has to be Bobby Fischer against Boris Spassky. In politics, it might be John F. Kennedy against Richard Nixon, or perhaps Abraham Lincoln against Stephen Douglas. But for sheer human drama, there is a strong argument that all of these were topped by the pitched battle, both personal and intellectual, between Harry Houdini, the great debunker of self-proclaimed psychics, and Mina Crandon, the most successful psychic of the twentieth century. Featured repeatedly on the front pages of the nation's leading newspapers, Crandon was Houdini's hardest case and his greatest nemesis. And as it happens, the two were intensely attracted to each other.

David Jaher's stunning and brilliantly written account of the battle between the Great Houdini and the blond Witch of Lime Street illuminates a lost period in American history. Improbably, it also offers significant lessons about the formation of people's beliefs and the sources of social divisions—scientific, political, or otherwise. Jaher helps to explain how and why the most highly educated people can diverge on fundamental matters, even when the evidence is altogether clear.

In the 1920s, some of the world's greatest thinkers were convinced that people could speak to the dead. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes, the canonical detective, who could always see through fakery and artifice. Having lost a son to influenza at the very end of the Great War, Doyle was also a "convinced Spiritualist" who thought death "rather an unnecessary thing." In his popular 1918 book, *The New Revelation*, he argued vigorously on behalf of spiritualism. His dedication: "To all the brave men and women, humble or learned, who have the moral courage during seventy years to face ridicule or worldly disadvantage in order to testify to an all-important truth." Between 1919 and 1930, Doyle wrote twelve more books on the same subject.

One of Doyle's allies was the eminent British physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, who did important work on the discharge of electricity, X rays, and radio signals. Lodge contended that he was in touch with Raymond, his dead son; he wrote a book about their communication and the science that explained it. President of the British Society for Psychical Research (originally led by Cambridge's Henry Sidgwick, probably the greatest philosopher of the time), Lodge sought to make a serious study of the subject. Charles Richet, a professor at the Collège de France who had won the Nobel Prize in physiology, coined the term "ectoplasm" for the matter from which ghostly apparitions formed. Thomas Edison was no spiritualist, but he announced his intention to work on a



Harry Houdini, about to be padlocked into a packing case and lowered into New York Harbor, 1914

mechanism to communicate with people who had crossed over.

The era's most influential skeptic? Harry Houdini. Born Erich Weiss in Budapest, Houdini is now known as an escape artist, but he began his career as a magician and a medium. To make a living in hard times, he worked as "the celebrated Psychometric Clairvoyant," with the power to communicate with "the Other Side." While he proved a pretty convincing psychic, he discovered that he had a unique talent, even a kind of genius: escaping the apparently inescapable. Jaher writes:

They locked him in a dreaded Siberian prison van, bottled him in a milk can, and entombed him in a block of ice in Holland. They shackled him to a spinning windmill, the chassis of an automobile, the muzzle of a loaded cannon. They put him in a padlocked US mailbag, roped him to the twentieth-story girder of an unfinished skyscraper, sealed him in a giant envelope, and boxed him in a crate nailed tight and dropped in New York Harbor. He emerged triumphant and smiling.

Houdini's talent had a lot to do with his extraordinary physical abilities. He was extremely strong, and he trained himself to use his toes the way most people use their fingers. But he also had a Sherlock Holmes-like capacity

to engage in detective work. Caught in a trap, he had an ability to see, almost at a glance, the multiple steps that would enable him to find his way out.

As Houdini's fame grew, he maintained a skeptical but keen interest in spirit communication, intensified by his devastation at the death of his beloved mother (the love of his life). He and Doyle were good friends, and they had many discussions of the topic, with Houdini acknowledging his desire to be convinced that Doyle was right. But every medium he encountered was a fraud, and he became the world's leading expert "on the tricks of phony psychics," debunking some of the hardest cases. Edison, for example, believed that one famous "mentalist," named Bert Reiss, was in fact clairvoyant. Houdini easily demonstrated that he was a fake.

In the 1920s, as now, *Scientific American* was a highly respected publication, dedicated to the dissemination of research findings. In 1922, Doyle challenged the magazine and its editor-in-chief, Orson Munn, to undertake a serious investigation of psychic phenomena. James Malcolm Bird, an editor there (and previously a mathematics professor at Columbia University), was intrigued. In November the magazine established a highly publicized contest, with a prize of \$5,000 for anyone who could produce "conclusive" evidence of "manifestations" of psychic powers—as, for example, making objects fly around the room. The magazine soberly announced that as of yet, it was

"unable to reach a definite conclusion as to the validity of psychic claims."

Five judges were chosen. The most eminent was William McDougall, chairman of the Harvard Psychology Department and president of the American Society for Psychical Research. (William James had been his predecessor in both positions.) Daniel Frost Comstock, a respected physicist and engineer, had taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (and later introduced Technicolor to film). Walter Franklin Prince, a Ph.D. from Yale, had explored a number of purportedly supernatural events; he had always been able to offer natural explanations. Hereward Carrington, a prolific writer and onetime magician, specialized in exposing fakes. Rounding out the committee, the magazine added Houdini, author of a forthcoming book on unmasking psychics. The contest captured the public's imagination. *The New York Times* called it "the Acid Test of Spiritualism."

All of the initial candidates failed that test; the committee saw through them. In the meantime, a woman named Mina Crandon was getting attention in Boston. Her husband—wealthy, handsome, and significantly older—was a prominent Harvard-trained gynecologist, married twice before. In the early 1920s, Dr. Crandon attended one of Sir Oliver Lodge's lectures on spiritualism, and the two spoke at length that night. Crandon was intrigued: "I couldn't understand it. It did not fit into any pattern I had previously known about scientists." He became obsessed. According to a friend, "he had taken to the psychical research movement like a Jew to Marxism."

His wife was witty, warm, and fun-loving. One friend, speaking for many, described her as a "very very beautiful girl" and "probably the most utterly charming woman I have ever known." Mrs. Crandon initially disparaged her husband's interest in spiritualism, joking that as a gynecologist, "naturally he was interested in exploring the netherworld." Nonetheless, she thought that "a séance sounded like great fun," and so she decided on a lark to attend one. The medium, a local minister, claimed to contact the spirit of Mina's brother, Walter, who had died in a tragic railroad accident at the age of twenty-eight. The minister also told her that "she had rare powers and soon all would know it."

Not long thereafter, the Crandons hosted an unusual party at their home on Lime Street. The purpose of the party? To find a ghost. Mrs. Crandon found it all absurd: "They were all so solemn about it that I couldn't help laughing." But as the participants linked hands in a circle on a table, it started to vibrate, eventually crashing to the floor. To see which member of the circle was a medium, each took turns leaving the room. When Mrs. Crandon departed, the vibrations stopped; her friends applauded when she reentered. With the same group and a few others, the Crandons continued their experiments. Everyone who was there attested to some remarkable events, including rapping noises and movements of the table. Six days later, Mrs. Crandon appeared to be possessed by the

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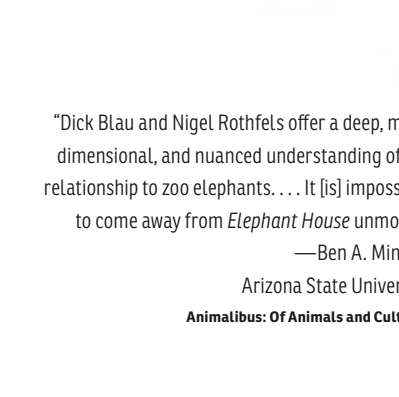
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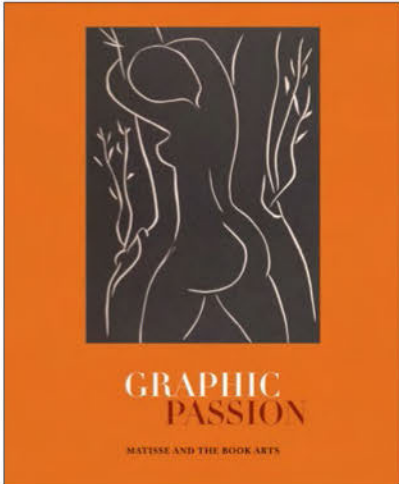
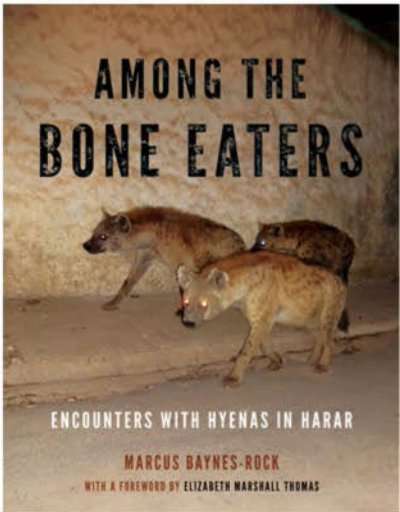
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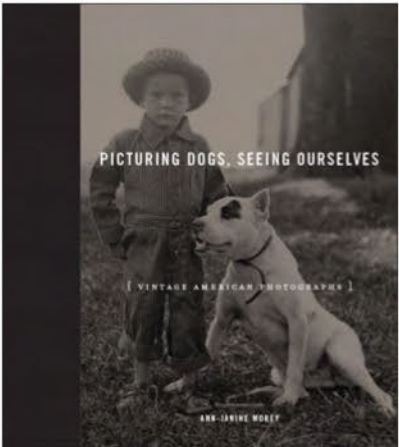
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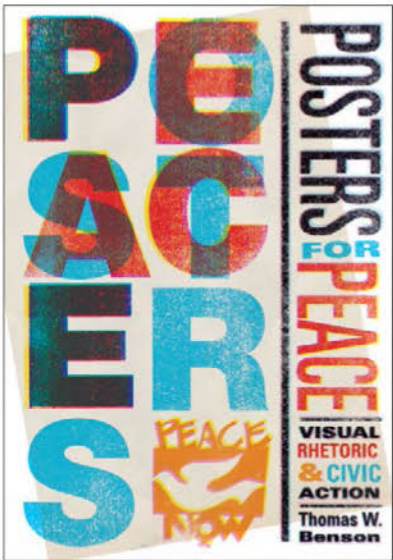
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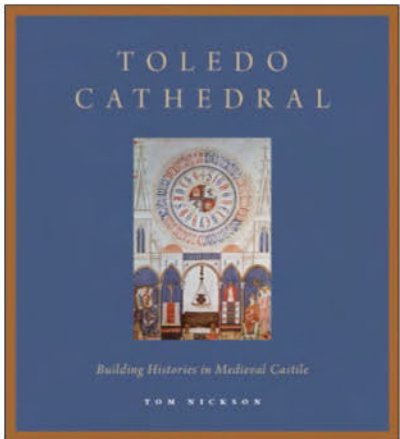


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spirit of her brother Walter, who spoke in “a guttural voice unrecognizable as her own,” and who was funny and immensely lively, even delightful (and engagingly coarse and profane).

As her fame began to spread in Boston, members of the Harvard community tried to debunk her. An acquaintance of Dr. Crandon, a Harvard psychologist named Dr. Roback, suspected “spirit humbug,” but could find no explanation for what he observed. He enlisted McDougall to help solve the mystery. Attending Mina’s séances, both psychologists were baffled. Another visitor at the time said that he “was present many times when Walter’s voice was as clear as that of any person in the circle,” and also “close to my ear, whispering some very personal comment about me or my family.”

In December, Crandon and his wife traveled to Paris and London to demonstrate her abilities. She was a sensation. In London, she performed in front of several investigators, appearing to make a table rise and float. The Crandons became friendly with Doyle, who swore to “the truth and range of her powers.” Lodge told colleagues that when they visited the United States, there were just two things that they must see: Niagara Falls and Mrs. Crandon.

Intrigued by the publicity, Bird, the *Scientific American* editor, decided to visit the Crandons in Boston. He was immediately struck by her apparent sincerity, her elegance, and her keen sense of humor, which he described as “wicked.” He was also amazed by what he saw in the séances, which included flashes of light, raps, whistles, and cool breezes. He told Orson Munn that “there had been a war between the Crandons and the Harvard scientists.” Munn asked: Who won? The medium won, Bird answered. He invited her to enter the magazine’s contest.

Accepting the challenge, she performed repeatedly in front of Bird and various committee members, moving objects, producing noises in various places, and channeling Walter. In the spring and summer of 1924, Bird himself visited Lime Street nearly sixty times. He was convinced that Mrs. Crandon was genuine. Comstock, who attended fifty-six séances, could find nothing amiss. McDougall tried for months to discover fraud, and he repeatedly accused her of fakery to her face. But he lacked any evidence of tricks, and “she responded to his incredulity with wit.” Carrington initially found the reports far-fetched, but after over forty visits, he could not explain what he saw.

It looked as if McDougall, Comstock, and Carrington would endorse her. Though skeptical by nature, Prince also seemed moved. In the July 1924 issue of *Scientific American*, Bird wrote about her, protecting her privacy with the name “Margery.” He said that “the initial probability of genuineness [is] much greater than in any previous case which the Committee has handled.” Bird’s article was widely discussed. A headline in *The New York Times* read, “Margery Passes All Psychic Tests.” The *Boston Herald* exclaimed, “Four of Five Men Chosen to Bestow Award Sure She Is 100 P.C. Genuine.”

Reading all this, Houdini, who had not had an opportunity to see the fa-

mous Margery in action, exploded. Traveling immediately to New York, he asked Bird if she was going to receive the prize. Bird replied, “Most decidedly.” Houdini insisted that it would be unfair to give her the award unless he had had his own opportunity to investigate her claims. Bird agreed, and Dr. Crandon was not pleased. Writing to Doyle before the meeting, he said, “My deep regret is that this low-minded Jew has any claim on the word American”; he described the coming encounter as “war to the finish.”

Mrs. Crandon’s reaction was far more positive. Houdini had been a star since she was a child, and she was proud to receive him. She found him polite, curious, dignified, even enchanting. On the night of his arrival, she put on one of her standard performances, apparently impressing everyone with a table that suddenly fell over, a bell box that seemed to ring of its own accord, a moving cabinet, and a slowed and stopped Victrola. As Bird drove Munn and Houdini back to their hotel, Munn asked Houdini what he thought. He replied immediately: “All fraud—every bit of it.”

Notwithstanding that judgment, he and Mrs. Crandon remained on excellent terms. He appeared to be charmed by her beauty. Jaher singles out a photograph taken the next day, which Mrs. Crandon had asked Houdini to keep private. As Jaher remarks, Houdini was generally formal with women, but in this picture, he is leaning very close; the two look like lovers. “He holds her hand and smiles at her affectionately—while she has turned to him as if expecting a kiss.” In the aftermath of his visit, they enjoyed a warm correspondence. “I am glad to be able to say I know ‘The Great Houdini,’” she wrote him.

Observing her closely on several occasions, Houdini began to figure out, and to specify, exactly how she produced some of her most impressive effects. With evident admiration, he reported, Mrs. Crandon had produced “the ‘slickest’ ruse I have ever detected, and it has converted all skeptics.” He added, “It has taken my thirty years of experience to detect her in her various moves.” In November 1924 he wrote a lengthy pamphlet, complete with highly detailed drawings of the séances, with which he specified exactly how Mrs. Crandon was able, in the dark, to maneuver her legs, head, feet, arms, shoulders, and head to produce the various effects. For example, he showed how she surreptitiously maneuvered her leg to tap the top of the bell box (thus producing a ring), and how she was able to bend her head under the table to push it up and over. “As she is unusually strong and has an athletic body,” he wrote, “she can press her wrists so firmly on the arms of the chair that she can move her body and sway it at will.” Embarking on a kind of no-holds-barred campaign against her, he insisted that Mrs. Crandon is “a shrewd, cunning woman” and “resourceful to the extreme.” In his own public performances, he was able to replicate many (though far from all) of her effects.

Mrs. Crandon’s numerous defenders were unconvinced. They portrayed Houdini as implacably close-minded, himself a cheat. Doyle denounced Houdini as prejudiced and dishonest; the denunciation destroyed their friendship. (Even years later, Doyle proclaimed that the incident “was

never an exposure of Margery, but it was a very real exposure of Houdini.”) From *Scientific American*, the official verdict came on February 12, 1925: Houdini was correct. Prince and McDougall captured the consensus with these words: “We have observed no phenomena of which we can assert that they could not have been produced by normal means.” The sole dissenter, Carrington, stated that he had been “convinced that genuine phenomena have occurred here.”

For Margery, however, that was hardly the end. Bird promptly rose to her



Mina Stinson Crandon and Harry Houdini in a Pennsylvania newspaper, 1925

defense, saying Houdini had made up his mind in advance and characterizing him as a liar and an ignoramus. (Jaher suggests that Houdini was jealous of Margery’s spectacular success.) She continued to hold séances, joking that 150 years before, she would have been executed as a witch, but “now they send committees of professors from Harvard to study me. That represents some progress, doesn’t it?” Even Houdini was unable to explain some of her new feats, conceding that “the lady is subtle.” *Life* magazine said that she was “almost as hard to bury as the League of Nations.”

But as the months and years went by, her act seemed less and less credible. A new group of Harvard researchers undertook a six-month investigation and

found strong evidence of trickery. In 1930, the ever-loyal Bird, who worked very hard to discredit the Harvard study, confessed that to fool Houdini, Margery had solicited his help in producing some of her effects. While continuing to believe that she was genuine, Bird conceded that when put “in a situation where she thought she might have to choose between fraud and a blank séance,” she “was willing to choose fraud.” Most damningly, researchers exposed one of her most bizarre effects, in which “Walter” seemed to make his own fingerprint appear on wax. The print turned out to be identical to that of Mrs. Crandon’s dentist.

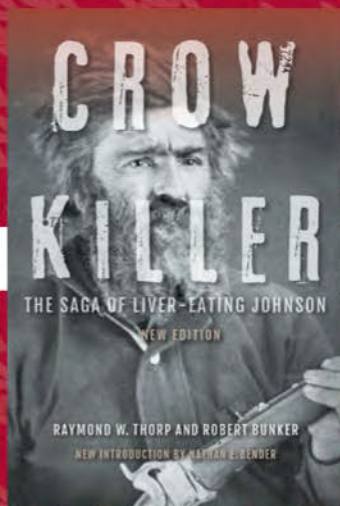
As it happens, a lot was going on at 10 Lime Street in the mid-1920s. Late in her life, Mrs. Crandon spoke fondly of her affair with Carrington, her only loyalist on the committee. (Perhaps he enjoyed attesting that “genuine phenomena have occurred here.”) Bird also claimed to have had a romance, though that might have been his imagination; she described him as “disgusting.” Both McDougall and Prince reported that she attempted to seduce them. Houdini said the same, adding, “When I walked into the seance room and saw that beautiful blonde, her applesauce meant nothing to me. I have been through apple orchards.” But all the while, she spoke of him with admiration: “I respect Houdini more than any of the bunch. He has both feet on the ground all the time.” And she expressed genuine sorrow at his death, singling out his virility, his determination, and his courage.

One of Jaher’s great achievements is to build real suspense in a tale whose conclusion is foreordained. But a deep mystery remains: What led Mrs. Crandon to do what she did? Here’s a guess. Jaher suggests that by 1923, her marriage was troubled. Dr. Crandon was depressive, intensely hardworking, and obsessed by spiritualism. Playful, resourceful, and competitive, his wife was initially willing to have some fun with the topic. But as she learned, she was also exceptionally talented, full of charisma, a natural magician—and her talent could be put to use in precisely the matters that most interested her husband. As she became well known, things began to get out of hand. What started as a kind of game, essentially with friends, turned into international news. And when that happened, she enlisted her husband, Carrington, Bird, and undoubtedly others as accomplices. Importantly, her role as Margery also created a kind of marital glue. She was stuck in it.

There is another mystery. How could so many people believe that Margery was genuine? Were they irrational? Not necessarily. At the time, a lot of people thought that it might be possible to contact the dead. True, many people were skeptical—but how likely was it that a young Boston housewife, without any training or financial motives, would have the desire, and the extraordinary skill and strength, to do what Mrs. Crandon did? To equal and in some ways surpass Houdini himself? To find a way to move tables and other objects, to make rapping noises, to ring bells in closed boxes, and to produce an apparently male voice, altogether different from her own, and displaying a wholly distinct personality? As improbable as contact with “the other side” might have seemed,



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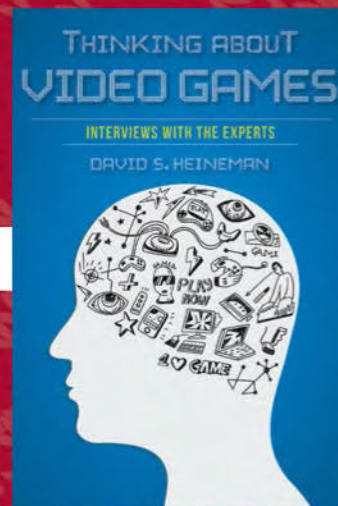
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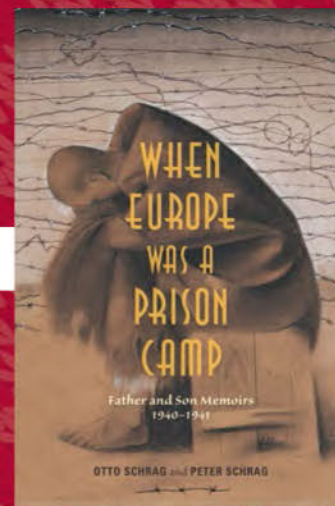
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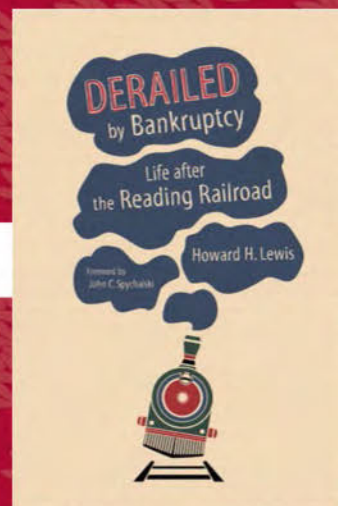
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—*Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)*

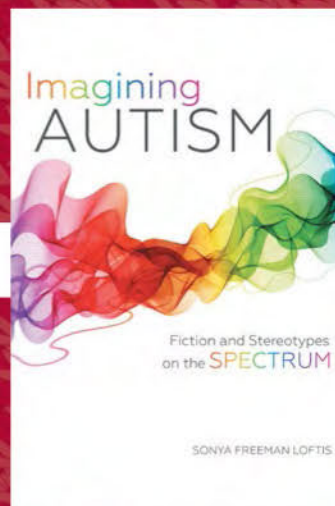


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This groundbreaking book by an autistic looks at fictional characters widely understood as autistic, including Sherlock Holmes and Boo Radley to discover their impact on cultural stereotypes, autistic culture, and the identity politics of autism.



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the complexity, sophistication, and evident credibility of the performance might have made fraud appear less probable still.

Jaher's story is captivating and unforgettable, but it can easily be dismissed as a historical curiosity of an era when highly educated citizens of a barely recognizable United States were willing to believe in crazy things. But any such dismissal would be a big mistake. According to a recent poll, 45 percent of Americans believe in ghosts, or think that the spirits of dead people can sometimes come back. Through-

out the world, people continue to believe in magic, miracles, psychics, and spirits, and a lot of them are highly educated. Many people scoff at science, or at least distrust the scientific consensus. They do not believe the experts and their supposed evidence. They believe the people they trust (the behavioral phenomenon of "social proof"). They think what they like to think (the behavioral phenomenon of "motivated reasoning"). They like to see a little magic, or perhaps a lot. They are moved by their own Margerys, who may have an extraordinary talent, the

defining skill of magicians, which is to direct their audience's attention exactly and only where they want it. (The most effective marketers have the same skill; so do the best politicians.)

Consider a little tale from one of Margery's investigators, the Princeton psychologist Henry McComas, who described her supernatural feats to Houdini with great wonder, insisting that he saw every one of them with his own eyes. McComas reported that for the rest of his life, he would not forget the scorn with which Houdini greeted those words. "You

say, you *saw*. Why you didn't see anything. What do you see now?" At that point, Houdini slapped a half-dollar between his palms, and it promptly disappeared.

His great adversary never confessed. In her very last days, a researcher suggested to a failing Mrs. Crandon, widowed for two years, that she would die happier if she finally did so, and let the world know about her methods. To his surprise, her old twinkle of merriment returned to her eyes. She laughed softly and offered her answer: "Why don't you guess?" □

# How Good Can You Be?

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

## Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help

by Larissa MacFarquhar.  
Penguin, 320 pp., \$27.95

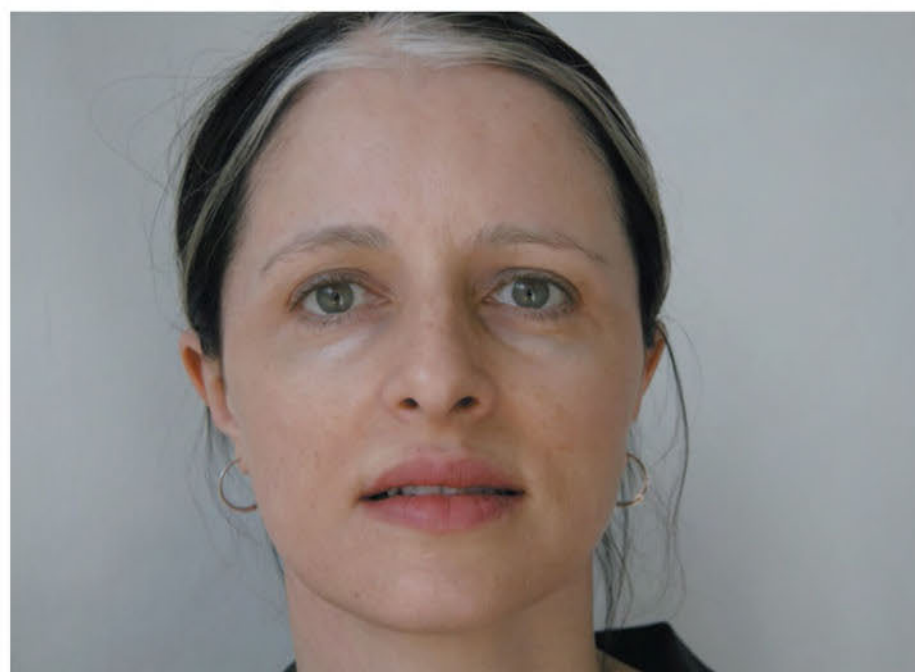
In *Strangers Drowning*, Larissa MacFarquhar focuses on extreme behavior of a particular kind, that of what one might call moral outliers. These are people who are motivated to act in extraordinary ways to alleviate the suffering of others with whom they otherwise have no ties.

It's a normal human response to be disturbed by the very fact of suffering. Our strongest feelings of empathy may be aroused by those closest to us, but we are not entirely unmoved by the stories of misery that greet us everyday in the newspaper: "Winter Poses New Danger for Migrants," "Migrant Suffocations in Truck Near Hungary Reveal Tactics of Smugglers."

But for most of us our disturbances are contained; they don't take over our lives. It is a sorry fact about our world that there is a great deal of suffering, so much of which could be alleviated, and we deplore it. But our attention isn't fixated on the sorry fact, or we couldn't live as we do, couldn't give ourselves to our own goals and projects, some of which might even be worthwhile.

MacFarquhar is interested in people who are different, whose attention is consumed by the sorry fact, or at least some aspect of it, of suffering by people with whom they have no immediate connection. Just as most of us can't allow the sorry fact to overtake us, these people can't help but be overtaken. In the face of it, they may slight not only their own well-being but the well-being of those who are closest to them, not allowing the mere contingencies of relationship to detract from the intensity of their attention—much, for example, as outliers in the sciences or the arts may do with respect to their work (and even feeling morally justified in doing so).

The attention of the leading characters in MacFarquhar's book takes the form of specific moral projects—ministering to the *hikikomori* of Japan, reclusive adolescents or adults who have entirely withdrawn from social life, in order to prevent suicides; adopting unwanted children; reducing the suffering of factory-farmed animals; working in



Larissa MacFarquhar, Brooklyn, 2015

Philip Gourevitch

high-paying jobs for the sole purpose of giving away most of their money. Their sense of themselves is shaped by their moral projects. It is what they live for.

MacFarquhar calls these outliers "do-gooders," making it clear from the onset that it is only the extremes of behavior that interest her:

I don't mean a part-time, normal do-gooder—someone who has a worthy job, or volunteers at a charity, and returns to an ordinary family life in the evenings. I mean a person who sets out to live as ethical a life as possible. I mean a person who's drawn to moral goodness for its own sake. I mean someone who pushes himself to moral extremity, who commits himself wholly, beyond what seems reasonable.

The larger part of MacFarquhar's book offers us profiles of do-gooders, shaped into engrossing narratives that reach from their childhood into the emergence of specific moral preoccupations that then lead to their life-defining projects. Because she is interested in outliers, their individual stories are, even from childhood, different from the stories of most of us in the same way the stories of, say, geniuses are. Her subjects, MacFarquhar writes,

are driven by a sense of duty they felt since they were too small to

know what duty was, much less how anybody else thought about it. The people they came from thought they were as weird and extreme as anyone else did. They didn't come from a community or join a movement in which their sacrifice was normal, part of the order of things.

Although MacFarquhar's subjects are all alike in being acutely affected by the fact of suffering, there is much variety among them, not only in the kinds of life projects they choose but in their reasons for choosing them, the kinds of intuitions and rationales that move them. Some are religious, some not, and a few are hostile to religion. Some are impulsive and emotional in their moral decisions, others deliberate and reflective. Some have sophisticated moral theories through which they filter their decisions, others have nothing approaching a theory, and their decisions can appear inexplicable, even to themselves.

In fact, the variety among them is such that not every one of them would agree that all the others are truly pursuing "moral goodness for its own sake." This indicates a degree of vagueness in various central concepts that seem to be wandering at large in the book—like "moral goodness for its own sake" or "the ethical life"—and this vagueness poses a problem. It is not quite

clear just what MacFarquhar's own aims for her book are. Does she mean to simply fascinate us by the extreme forms that human nature can take or accomplish something more by way of her profiles?

Among her subjects are, for example, Sue and Hector Badeau, who, in addition to their own two birth children, adopted twenty children with special needs all but guaranteeing that no other family would want them. These included three children with conditions that doomed them to early deaths, so that the couple voluntarily assumed the greatest grief that most of us can imagine. The Badeaus, who are religious, "prayed on" their decisions to adopt children, and also allowed themselves to be swayed by how personally drawn they felt to the stories and even to the pictures of the children.

These were highly emotional decisions, mysterious even to them. "It's hard to explain," said Hector. "It was like instant love." Sue adds, "It was as if they already were our kids, but they were somehow not with us and we had to go get them."

Another of MacFarquhar's subjects is Murlidhar Amte, known as Baba, who was born into a privileged Brahmin family in India and was something of a bon vivant in his early years, with characteristic intensity, including pursuing a great many adventures and pleasures. He reacted violently against his family's Hinduism, against conventions of any kind, and he retained his hostility toward organized religion throughout his life.

One rainy evening, Baba encountered a leper in the last stages of disfigurement lying at the side of the road, a person barely human, and his first reaction was revulsion and terror. He was mortified by his cowardice, he who had always thought himself fearless, who had been praised by Gandhi himself for fearlessness. His less than heroic reaction preyed on him, even provoking self-hatred, until he decided to expunge the shame by embracing his fear.

He founded a leper colony in the middle of a jungle in India, eagerly testing the limits of his own endurance. Baba's moral views emerged in response to his work and revolved around the importance of suffering:

He realized that it was not just the alleviation of suffering that excited



him but the suffering itself. . . . Pain broke a man open and let other people in; suffering was at the core of what it meant to be human.

Then there is a Massachusetts couple, Julia Wise and Jeff Kaufman, who, identifying with the movement known as “effective altruism,” figure out the bare minimum of money they require and donate the rest to charities calculated to deliver the maximum reduction of human misery per dollar spent.

Effective altruism is a movement that has a great deal of moral philosophy behind it, prominently associated with the Princeton philosopher Peter Singer as well as other philosophers.<sup>1</sup> Effective altruism rests on utilitarianism, a theory that goes back to such nineteenth-century philosophers as Jeremy Bentham, William Godwin, John Stuart Mill, and Henry Sidgwick, and according to which an action is morally justified if it results in the greatest utility for the greatest number of people—where utility might be assessed as happiness or pleasure or the satisfaction of preferences. However utility is to be defined, it is to be spread around the maximum number of individuals, and it is this outcome that a person must consider in deciding how to act, according no more weight to how she personally will be affected by her action than to any of the other affected individuals.

Utilitarianism has its more and less severe forms, where the less severe—advocated by Sidgwick himself, often acknowledged as the best of the utilitarian theorists—allows a person some leeway in honoring what Bernard Williams called “such things as the disposition to tell the truth, to be loyal to one’s friends, to feel a particular affection and concern for one’s own children and other such items.”<sup>2</sup> The utilitarianism that underlies effective altruism is of the more severe variety.

Julia Wise’s embrace of effective altruism turns the decision to have a child into an agonizing process:

Once Julia opened herself up to the thought that children might not be necessary—once she moved them, as it were, to a different column in her moral spreadsheet, from essential to discretionary—she realized just how enormous a line item a child would be. Children would be the most expensive nonessential thing she could possibly possess, so by having children of her own she

would be in effect killing other people’s children.

This moral dilemma is solved for Julia when her husband computed how much a child of theirs would need to give away of her own income over her expected lifetime (around 10 percent) in order for her charitable contributions to offset what her parents didn’t donate because they’d spent the money raising her.

These three examples give a sense of the wide range of moral characters and dispositions exemplified by MacFarquhar’s do-gooders, as well as of their meriting the description of outliers. What joins them are the characteristics that MacFarquhar has built into her notion of the do-gooder, not only their life’s focus on the sorry fact of the

world’s suffering, but the refusal to let personal relationships (including their own personal identity) dissipate their focus. Those who set out “to live as ethical a life as possible,” who are drawn “to moral goodness for its own sake,” will not allow the natural feelings they have toward their own loved ones to overly influence them, any more than they allow the natural feelings they have for their own selves to overly influence them. Impartiality— austere, though not necessarily dispassionate—is, for MacFarquhar, a necessary condition for those she categorizes as do-gooders. (Indeed she seems to regard austere impartiality as a necessary condition for the moral life itself.)

This doesn’t mean, of course, that all of her do-gooders are utilitarians. Although utilitarians (of the severe va-

riety) demand austere impartiality, not all those who demand austere impartiality are utilitarians.<sup>3</sup>

So, for example, consider Baba, who is decidedly a nonutilitarian, whether in practice or theory. Still, he conducted himself with austere impartiality, both toward himself and toward

<sup>3</sup>MacFarquhar’s title, *Drowning Strangers*, is derived from a thought experiment that Peter Singer presented in a paper of 1972, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” which makes the case for our responsibility to help desperate strangers with the same sense of urgency with which we help those closer to us. This sense of urgency is what characterizes MacFarquhar’s do-gooders, but one shouldn’t be misled into conflating do-goodism with the views of Peter Singer. MacFarquhar does not.

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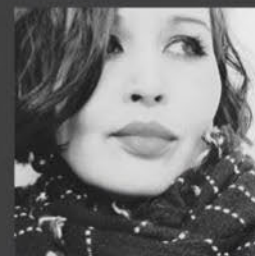
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<sup>1</sup>Singer’s last two books have been devoted to effective altruism: *The Life You Can Save* (Random House, 2010) and *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (Yale University Press, 2015). See also John Gray’s review of Singer’s last book in these pages, May 21, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Bernard Williams, *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2006). Williams continues: “Such an account plays quite a large role in carrying out the task that Sidgwick assigns to Utilitarian theory, of explaining and also in some sense justifying various parts of commonsense morality which might at first glance not seem to be of Utilitarian inspiration.”



his loved ones. He offered himself as a human guinea pig in the service of finding a cure for leprosy, getting injected with the leprosy bacillus, for which, as it happened, he carried natural immunity (as do most of us, a fact only subsequently discovered). He also married a woman who sympathized with his aspirations and had children who were raised to accommodate themselves to their parents' unbending standards, exposed not only to the dangers of catching leprosy but to being eaten alive by panthers. One of his sons, left so completely on his own while Baba and his wife ministered to the lepers, amused himself by playing with scorpions in the absence of toys.

Given the extremes of behavior on which MacFarquhar has set her sights, we can expect her profiles to be fascinating, and they are. But does she have aims beyond those of merely fascinating us? It appears that she has two. (I say "appears" because her prose, heavily narrative, tends to obscure her aims.)

The first is to try to show us that people with extreme moral commitments do not form an empty category—that is, there truly are people whose lives are shaped by their ethical aspirations, whatever they may be. She aims to absolve do-gooders of the cynical interpretation that sees them as either masochists or manipulators, as either self-deceivers or even more sinister and pernicious, unfit to even be considered models for others. Her second aim is to consider them as possible models that people might follow. She presents them to us so that we might rethink our own lives.

Obviously her second aim demands that she fulfill her first. If the category of people who live outside the usual assumptions is empty—if it is never really ethical aspirations that are behind such extreme behavior—then there's no need to consider what implications these outliers might have for our own lives. In three chapters, intermittently spaced, she considers what she calls "the undermining of do-gooders." She presents the dismissive views of Anna Freud and the French psychoanalyst André Green, "detailing the louché displacements of the ego that delighted in renunciation." She describes the movement against "codependency," which analyzes would-be saviors as suffering as much from a species of addiction as those whom they would save, keeping sufferers in thrall to their suffering so that they can feel useful or powerful.

The last of her three chapters chronicling the undermining of do-gooders explores the attitudes of novelists, ranging from Charles Dickens to Hilary Mantel. "If there is one place more than any other where do-gooders are set up as enemies of humanness, it is in fiction, particularly in modern novels," writes MacFarquhar. A novelist's loyalty is to human life itself, the gloriously pulsating uncontrollable exuberance of it, in comparison to which a do-gooder's moral extremism, which would sacrifice so much of life to high ideals, seems a kind of vivisection.

The closest MacFarquhar comes to mounting an argument against these deriders is in her response to those who cast do-gooders as codependents, people who are compelled to act in order to save others. So what, she says, if they

are compelled? Any person who acts for what she takes to be moral reasons will feel compelled by those reasons:

Anyone who acknowledges the force of morality at all feels bound to do *something*. A person who understood herself to be freely choosing a moral life as just one option among others, with no obligation involved—who might with the same sense of freedom have chosen to spend her life throwing pebbles into a bucket—would not be more free but more confused. A person who feels herself wholly unfettered, unbound by duties of any kind, is not free, but a sociopath.

Of course, this compressed argument, even if successful in establishing the motivating force of moral considerations, doesn't, in itself, explain or justify the virtue of giving one's entire life over to ethical aspirations. But it's not hard to see how the argument can lead where MacFarquhar wants it to go. If a sense of a moral reason can motivate at least some people (nonsociopaths) to act, then surely there can be people—MacFarquhar's do-gooders—who are motivated by almost nothing but their sense of moral reasons (never mind, for the moment, whether their moral reasons are sound).

But what of her second aim, applying the example of these outliers to figuring out whether we, too, should strive to live as ethical a life as possible? Does she mean her profiles to serve such a purpose?

You will notice that the word "grappling" is in the subtitle. MacFarquhar doesn't just present her do-gooders as agonizing over their choices (which some of them do more than others). She means for us to grapple as well, just as she herself does in these pages. And if there is to be agonizing, then there must be a question with which we are invited to grapple. And here it is: "So is it good to try to live as moral a life as possible? Or is there something in the drive to extraordinary goodness that distances a person too much from ordinary humanity?" Immediately after posing the question, MacFarquhar asserts:

I don't think this question can be answered in the abstract. In the abstract, there are ideas about saints and perfection. Only actual lives convey fully and in a visceral way the beauty and cost of a certain kind of moral existence.

So yes, these profiles are meant to make us grapple with the question of how moral we should strive to be, understanding "moral" in the sense of being moved to action by the world's suffering impartially considered. It is a worthy question and has long been the focus of moral philosophers, certainly since the Enlightenment. The twist here is that instead of the dry niceties of moral philosophy, MacFarquhar offers us the richness of her profiles, each with the qualities of a fascinating short story. Who wouldn't prefer MacFarquhar's strategy of grappling, enlisting the force of narrative?

The question is: Can her strategy respond to the questions she raises about the choices people make? I think not. In the absence of philosophical analy-

sis, which would firm up the vagueness lurking in such terms as "moral goodness in itself" and "the ethical life," we can't even judge the moral value of her do-gooders—a point highlighted by the fact that some of them would morally object to her inclusion of the others.

So, for example, Julia Wise, together with the other "effective altruists" we meet in the chapter devoted to her, might deny that many of the others in the book (with the possible exception of the animal-rights do-gooder) are going about the moral life in the right way. These others, she might say, are overly emotional and haphazard in their actions. Baba devotes himself to lepers just because he happened to trip over one and felt his self-pride offended by his own terror. The Badeaus impulsively adopt children who tugged at their emotions. Their decisions got them into situations that they couldn't always handle. An effective altruist like Julia Wise is not only committed to doing all the good that she can do—and has utilitarianism to back her up on this—but also to figuring out, with coolheaded rationality, *how* to do all the good she can do.

Perhaps in reading MacFarquhar's account of "the beauty and cost" of the Badeaus' life you will be emotionally moved by them—even moved enough to want to emulate them. But then you are falling prey to the same kind of influence—too subjective and emotional, unable to offer an account of itself—that lured the Badeaus themselves into acting as they did. So, at any rate, an effective altruist would admonish you.

In other words, if MacFarquhar is serious about offering us her profiles as a way of grappling with how moral we ought to be—inviting us to assess the beauty and cost of these lives as a means to rethinking our own—then there is a problem. How can we assess the beauty and the cost of lives of extraordinary moral goodness if we can't even be certain it is genuinely moral goodness that is, in each case, being lived?

MacFarquhar's storytelling strategy, as fascinating as it is, can take us only so far, especially if, in order to keep the narrative interesting, such a variety of incommensurate moral characters and rationales are put before us. Like it or not, some analysis based on moral philosophy is required.

Perhaps, then, it's no wonder that, so far as her second aim is concerned, the conclusions MacFarquhar draws at the end are somewhat muted. She concludes that most of us can't be do-gooders—which seems a foregone conclusion, given how "weird and extreme" her chosen subjects are and can't help being—but that the world is better for having them, and not only because they offer some diminution of suffering. "These strange, hopeful, tough, idealistic, demanding, life-threatening, and relentless people, by their extravagant example, help keep those life-sustaining qualities alive." Perhaps it is so.

A moral passion runs throughout *Drowning Strangers*—or better, a passion for moral passion. In fact, of all the characters laid out for our inspection by Larissa MacFarquhar, it is her character—profoundly reflective and ardently grappling—that I find the most moving, discerning in it a beauty that MacFarquhar herself sees in her do-gooders. □

## Lincoln and Shakespeare

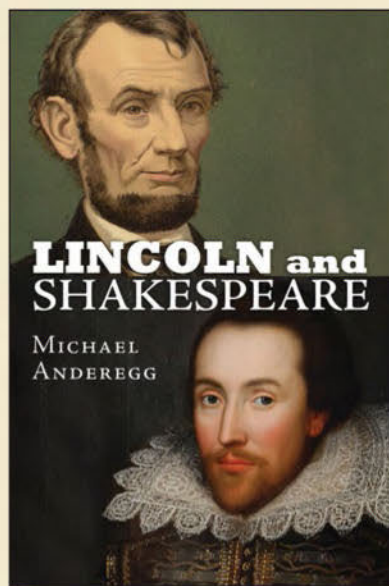
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# She Played Hard with Happiness

Colm Tóibín

## The Complete Stories

by Clarice Lispector,  
translated from the Portuguese  
by Katrina Dodson, edited and with  
an introduction by Benjamin Moser.  
New Directions, 645 pp., \$28.95

In Chapter Six of his novel *Murphy*, Samuel Beckett considered what he called “Murphy’s mind”:

Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain. Nothing ever had been, was or would be in the universe outside it but was already present as virtual, or actual, or virtual rising into actual, or actual falling into virtual, in the universe inside it.

In Beckett’s fiction, there is a sense that the spirit of his characters is elsewhere, hidden from their bodies. They may know how to think, but the notion that this leads them therefore to exist is a sour joke. The word “therefore” in the Cartesian equation has been somehow mislaid. Their bodies, in all their frailty and levels of discomfort, tell his characters that they are alive. This knowledge is made more comic and tragic and indeed banal by the darting quality of the minds of many of Beckett’s characters, by the amount of nonsense going on in their heads. They are like hens pecking at memory and experience.

Hens are dear to the strange, bitter heart of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. Their general helplessness combined with their persistence, their constant pecking and mindless squawking, seemed to animate something in her spirit. During her childhood in the north of Brazil, according to her biographer Benjamin Moser, “she spent hours with the chickens and hens in the yard.” “I understand a hen, perfectly,” she told an interviewer. “I mean, the intimate life of a hen. I know how it is.” One of her finest stories is “A Chicken,” three pages long, which tells of a bird trapped in a kitchen waiting to be sacrificed for Sunday lunch who decides to make a brief, defiant flight, only to be chased by the man of the house. “From rooftop to rooftop they covered more than a block. Ill-adapted to a wilder struggle for life, the chicken had to decide for herself which way to go, without any help from her race.”

The day is saved, or at least the chicken is, when she lays an egg and it is decided not to cook her, but instead to include her in the household. Thus

whenever everyone in the house was quiet and seemed to have forgotten her, she would fill up with a little courage, vestiges of the great escape—and roam around the tiled patio, her body following her head, pausing as if in a field, though her little head gave her away: vibratory and bobbing rapidly, the ancient fright of her species long since turned mechanical.

Lispector, however, has no interest in allowing this triumph to be more than brief. In a brisk and sudden final sen-

Clarice Lispector



tence, she does away with her brave bird: “Until one day they killed her, ate her and years went by.”

In a later story, “A Tale of So Much Love,” the figure of the chicken will reappear with even more human qualities. It begins: “Once upon a time there was a little girl who observed chickens so closely that she got to know their souls and innermost yearnings.” As the chicken is being eaten by the family, Lispector comments: “Chickens seem to have a prescience about their own fate and they never learn to love either their owners or the rooster. A chicken is alone in the world.”

Lispector also wrote a story, or a meditation, called “The Egg and the Chicken,” in which she ponders the great matter of Being from the perspective of chicken and egg:

The egg is the chicken’s great sacrifice. The egg is the cross the chicken bears in life. The egg is the chicken’s unattainable dream. The chicken loves the egg. She doesn’t know the egg exists. If she knew she had the egg inside her, would she save herself? If she knew she had the egg inside her, she would lose her state of being a chicken. Being a chicken is the chicken’s survival. Surviving is salvation. For living doesn’t seem to exist. Living leads to death.... Surviving is what’s called keeping up the struggle against life that is deadly. That’s what being a chicken is.

Besides chickens, Lispector was interested in rats. In “Another Couple of Drunks,” the narrator conjures up the aftermath of the death of a child:

The household rats take fright and start to race around the room. They crawl up your son’s face, still warm, gnaw at his little mouth. The woman screams and faints, for two hours. The rats visit her body too, cheerful, nimble, their tiny teeth gnawing here and there.... She looks around, gets up and the rats scatter.

In “Preciousness,” the girl recalls that when she was ten “a boy with a crush on her had thrown a dead rat at her.” In an essay on Brasília, included in this book as a story—it is a sort of story, but perhaps, as with many of these stories, it could be better defined as a strange display of sensibility—Lispector writes:

It was built with no place for rats. A whole part of us, the worst, precisely the one horrified by rats, that part has no place in Brasília. They wished to deny that we are worthless. A construction with space factored in for the clouds. Hell understands me better. But the rats, all huge, are invading.

If Brasília has no place for rats, then Rio de Janeiro, where many of these stories are set, has plenty of such spaces. In “Forgiving God,” the narrator of the story, who feels that she is “the mother of God” while walking down Avenida Copacabana,

almost stepped on a huge dead rat. In less than a second I was bristling from the terror of living, in less than a second I was shattering in panic, and doing my best to rein in my deepest scream. Nearly running in fright, blind in the midst of all those people, I wound up on the next block leaning on a pole, violently shutting my eyes, which no longer wanted to see. But the image stuck to my eyelids: a big red-haired rat, with an enormous tail, its feet crushed, and dead, still, tawny. My boundless fear of rats.

If rats then represent terror and chickens innocent striving for something approaching authenticity, humans, for Lispector, are strangely in the middle, often stricken with fear, or handing out terror, but ready also to soar or break loose or achieve some freedom or be fully alert to their fate in a time short enough for one of her stories to be enacted.

Clarice Lispector was born in Ukraine in 1920 and taken to Brazil as an infant. Raised in Recife, the north of the country, she married a diplomat and thus spent many years traveling before returning to Brazil to live in Rio de Janeiro. In 1966 she was badly injured in a fire in her apartment. She died in 1977.

By the time of her death, she had become, Benjamin Moser writes in his biography of her, “one of the mythical figures of Brazil, the Sphinx of Rio de Janeiro, a woman who fascinated her countrymen virtually from adolescence.”\* Her looks were often commented on and there was much gushing nonsense written about her. The translator Gregory Rabassa, for example, recalled being “flabbergasted to meet that rare person who looked like Marlene Dietrich and wrote like Virginia Woolf.” The poet Ferreira Gullar remarked that “she looked like a she-wolf, a fascinating wolf.” And the French critic Hélène Cixous declared that Lispector was what Kafka would have been had he been a woman, or “if Rilke had been a Jewish Brazilian born in the Ukraine. If Rimbaud had been a mother, if he had reached the age of fifty. If Heidegger could have ceased being German.”

While Lispector did not refer much in public to her family’s origins, they are made grimly clear in Moser’s biography. “The least one can say about the time and place of her birth,” he writes,

is that they were badly chosen.... What befell the Jews of the Ukraine around the time of Clarice Lispector’s birth was a disaster on a scale never before imagined. Perhaps 250,000 were killed: excepting the Holocaust, the worst anti-Semitic episode in history.

It may be too easy to explain the sort of estrangement that distinguishes the

\**Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector* (Oxford University Press, 2009), reviewed in these pages by Lorrie Moore, September 24, 2009.



work of Lispector as arising from her family's history and her own early years in Brazil, years marked by her mother's slow death from syphilis, caused by her having been raped before the family fled Ukraine. Her mother died in 1930 when Lispector was ten. Her father died a decade later.

The peculiar tone of her work takes its bearings equally perhaps from the Brazilian literary tradition itself, from figures such as Machado de Assis (1839–1908), whom she read as a teenager, and her contemporary João Guimarães Rosa (1908–1967), whom she admired. Neither of these writers was concerned with holding a mirror up to Brazilian society, but rather they were involved in breaking the mirror of fiction itself, creating images of estrangement in works that were formally experimental and ambitious, using tones that seemed to have no antecedents, remaking a tradition in their own brittle image. When Lispector began to write, it might have seemed almost natural for her to create stories that were often abstract, unhinged, haunted, highly peculiar, dealing with figures who were isolated, damaged, and, like the mind of Beckett's *Murphy*, "hermetically closed to the universe without."

In her mixture of nonchalance, inscrutability, wit, and knowing simplicity, in her use of tones that are whimsical and subtle, in the stories that are filled with abstractions, she has perhaps more in common with some Brazilian visual artists of her generation than she does with any writers, most notably Lygia Clark, who was born in the same year as Lispector, and also Hélio Oiticica, who both used minimal means and often flat color to create works of considerable intensity and oddness.

Between 1943, when her first book was published, and her death, Lispector produced nine novels, nine volumes of stories, some children's writing, and a good deal of journalism. In her stories the range is limited; her subject mainly is fearfulness in the lives of women, the fraught interior of the mind, the fragility of the domestic sphere, the ghostliness of the self. Her figures are unnerved by the world, its rituals and regulations; they are often frightened by interaction with others. They ask small questions but there is always the sense that the answers might turn out to be much larger, or more disquieting, than any of her characters have bargained for.

Thus she builds by a system of erasure. Social and political questions do not interest her, or the creation of three-dimensional figures, or characters whose motives make full sense or evoke easy sympathy, or indeed the natural world. In comparing the city of Brasília to "a beach without the sea," she could be describing the unsettling nature of her own writing, her own use of palpable absences. She works with much that is missing, eschewing the obvious for the sake of what becomes in the best stories a sort of penetrating emotional effect.

Some of her openings are startling. The first paragraph of "Interrupted Story," for example, begins:

He was sad and tall. He never spoke to me without making it understood that his gravest flaw lay

in his tendency toward destruction. And that was why, he'd say, stroking his black hair as if stroking the soft, hot fur of a kitten, that was why his life amounted to a pile of shards: some shiny, others clouded, some cheerful, others like a "piece of a wasted hour," meaningless, some red and full, others white, but already shattered.

Here she seems more fascinated by the words and the phrases themselves, and by creating a tone, than by any events that will subsequently unfold. She likes stories in which nothing, or nothing much, happens. "Excerpt" begins: "Really nothing happened on that gray afternoon in April." She also likes creating an opening sentence of direct and startling color, such as the opening of "Temptation": "She was sobbing. And as if the two o'clock glare weren't enough, she had red hair." Or the opening sentence of "The Solution": "Her name was Almira and she'd grown too fat." Or the even more vivid and startling opening of the story "Better Than to Burn": "She was tall, strong, hairy."

Her women are easily disturbed, thus self-contained by necessity. In "The Imitation of the Rose," Laura realizes that

she must never again give cause for alarm.... And most important of all was sparing everyone from suffering the least bit of doubt. And to never again cause other people to fuss over her....

Men are often a mystery. In "The Escape":

Her gaze starts evoking a deep well. Dark and silent water. Her gestures go blank but she has but one fear in life: that something will come along and transform her.... Desires are ghosts that dissolve as soon as you light the lamp of good sense. Why is it that husbands are good sense? Hers is particularly solid, good, and never wrong.

Her women often stay in bed. Home life puzzles them as they venture away from the domestic sphere toward some other realm, almost eschatological in its contours, as in the story "Love":

When she returned it would be the end of the afternoon and the children home from school needed her. In this way night would fall, with its peaceful vibration. In the morning she'd awake haloed by her calm duties. She'd find the furniture dusty and dirty again, as if repentantly come home. As for herself, she obscurely participated in the gentle black roots of the world. And nourished life anonymously. That was what she had wanted and chosen.

In "The Sound of Footsteps," Mrs. Cândida Raposo, who is eighty-one, goes to the doctor because she still feels

"the desire for pleasure." The doctor agrees that one solution might be if she "took care of it" herself. "That same night she found a way to satisfy herself on her own. Mute fireworks." Then the next paragraph comes straight from Lispector's personal lexicon of disappointment, with its own half-resigned diction: "Afterward she cried. She was ashamed. From then on she'd use the same method. Always sad. That's life, Mrs. Raposo, that's life. Until the blessing of death."

Lispector had no interest in blessing, or happiness for that matter. Rather, she entertained happiness so she could



Clarice Lispector, Rio de Janeiro, circa 1969

play with it, leave scratch marks on it, wound it as best she could. Thus "Happy Birthday," one of her finest stories, will deal with a birthday that is considerably less than happy. The woman whose birthday it is—she is eighty-nine—has to cut the cake. "And suddenly the old woman grabbed the knife. And without hesitation, as if in hesitating for a moment she might fall over, she cut the first slice with a murderer's thrust."

Slowly, the old lady begins to loathe her children who have gathered with their own families for this festive occasion:

How could she have given birth to those frivolous, weak, self-indulgent beings? The resentment rumbled in her empty chest. A bunch of communists, that's what they were; communists. She glared at them with her old woman's ire. They looked like rats jostling each other, her family. Irrepressible, she turned her head and with unsuspected force spat on the ground.

Objects and flowers, in Lispector's worldview, fare no better than people. "The last light of the afternoon was heavy and beat down solemnly on the objects." Hyacinths are "rigid against

the windowpane." Even teeth get it in the neck, a mouthful of them being referred to as "the misplaced cruelty of teeth." And speaking of getting it in the neck, in "The Solution" Almira stabs her friend Alice in the neck with a fork in a restaurant for no apparent reason, or perhaps to make sure that the reader is paying full attention, or perhaps even to allow Lispector to write the next sentence, which sounds beautiful in Katrina Dodson's translation: "The restaurant, according to the newspaper, rose as one."

While some stories appear whimsical and read like exercises, and others muse at length and almost absent-mindedly, almost abstractly, on habit and motive, or something that happened, others have an exquisite sharpness, the fruit of a most original and daring mind. In the best stories, something deeply strange is fully visualized by Lispector, as though it had come in a waking dream and it needed to be given urgent substance. "Mystery in São Cristóvão," for example, begins with the sort of domestic scene that is always ominous in Lispector's universe. A family is having a meal together. "There was nothing special about the gathering; they had just finished dinner and were chatting around the table, mosquitoes circling the light."

Then they go to sleep, and from a house on the corner emerge three figures, as though from a James Ensor painting:

One was tall and had on the head of a rooster. Another was fat and had dressed as a bull. And the third, who was younger, for lack of a better idea, had disguised himself as a lord from olden times and put on a devil mask, through which his innocent eyes showed.

As they set about stealing some hyacinths from the garden of the family who have previously been eating together, "from behind the dark glass of the window a white face was staring at them." It is the daughter of the house. Lispector now moves into a strange, luminous fictional terrain, lifting the drama with ghostly precision high above its own cause. When the moon appears

it was a stroke of danger for the four visages. So risky that, without a sound, four mute visions retreated without taking their eyes off each other, fearing that the moment they no longer held each other's gaze remote new territories would be ravaged....

The experience briefly ages the girl, but then, in the last paragraph:

The girl gradually recovered her true age. She was the only one not constantly peering around. But the others, who hadn't seen a thing, grew watchful and uneasy. And since progress in that family was the fragile product of



many precautions and a handful of lies, everything came undone and had to be remade almost from scratch. . . .

Some of Lispector's images are deeply grotesque. In "The Smallest Woman in the World"—originally translated by Elizabeth Bishop, who knew Lispector in Brazil—something whimsical slowly becomes oddly real and disturbing. It includes, as an aside, a story the cook told "about her time at the orphanage" when the girls, who had no dolls to play with, concealed the death of a fellow inmate from the nuns. "They hid the corpse in a wardrobe until the nun left, and played with the dead girl, giving her baths and little snacks, punishing her just so they could kiss her afterward, consoling her."

In "The Crime of the Mathematics Teacher," a man buries a dead dog only to unbury the creature in the final paragraph for no reason that is fully clear. The last two sentences read: "The man then looked around and to the heavens beseeching a witness to what he had done. And as if that still weren't enough, he started descending the slopes toward the bosom of his family." It is easy to hear the grim laughter here, as though the bosom of his family were somehow more transcendental or more scary than the heavens.

Lispector's command of tone allows her to be amused gently and with subtlety at times, at other times savagely, and then at other times, in the weakest stories, she creates a story with a throwaway tone, as though she could not really be bothered. In "Via Crucis," for example, a virgin gets pregnant. In one paragraph, the young woman treats the event as though it is ordinary. "Maria das Dores sent the maid out to buy the vitamins the gynecologist had prescribed. They were for her son's benefit." In the following paragraph, the pregnant virgin has another thought: "Divine son. She had been chosen by God to give the world the new Messiah." And then: "She bought a blue cradle. She started knitting little jackets and making cloth diapers."

God makes strange appearances in these stories. In "Report on the Thing," a late story:

God has no name: he preserves perfect anonymity: there is no language that utters his true name. . . .

I am now going to say a very serious thing that will seem like heresy: God is dumb. Because he does not understand, he does not think, he just is. . . . But He commits many errors. And knows it. Just look at us who are a grave error. Just look how we organize ourselves into society and intrinsically, from one to another. But there is one error He does not commit: He does not die.

In another late story, Lispector invokes the famous image of Christ with his outstretched arms on the hill of Corcovado overlooking Rio de Janeiro: her main character

had the oddest dream: she dreamed she saw the Christ on Corcovado—and where were his outstretched arms? They were tightly crossed, and Christ looked fed up as if to say: deal with it

yourselves, I've had it. It was a sin, that dream.

And then in her meditation on Brasília, God is also mentioned:

Brasília is artificial. As artificial as the world must have been when it was created. When the world was created, a man had to be created especially for that world. We are all deformed by our adaptation to the freedom of God. We don't know how we would be if we had been created first and the world were deformed after according to our requirements.

The state of being deformed spiritually or ontologically interested Lispector. She let her imagination range over

its fictional possibilities. She dramatized it in some stories by lifting restrictions on her characters to see what they would do. In other stories, she became interested in the thin and brittle nature of the self and in what she called "the destiny of those set loose upon the Earth, of those who don't measure their actions according to Good and Evil."

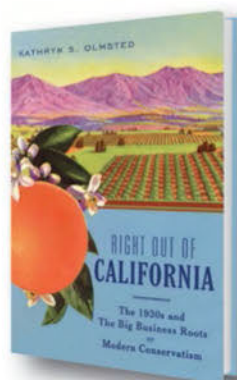
She was, all the time, ruefully aware of the limitations that writing imposed on her. Part of her dark vision included a sad knowledge of the frailty of the very words and phrases she used, the necessary thinness of her own observations and her games with form. Thus the images of the chicken and the rat were useful to her in that they carried more meaning with them, more weight somehow, than many of her images of

human striving. In an early story, she allowed her main character to feel this helplessness deeply and articulate as best she could the idea, as Beckett would have it, that she was resigned to fail better, but fail nonetheless:

Something beneath my thought, deeper and stronger, apprehends what happened and, in a fleeting instant, I see it clearly. But my brain is feeble and I can't manage to transform that vivid minute into thought.

Such a feeling and such failure would have been, oddly enough, deeply satisfying for Lispector, and easy for her to imagine, part of the shadow world she attempted to find pale and unsettling substance for in these stories. □

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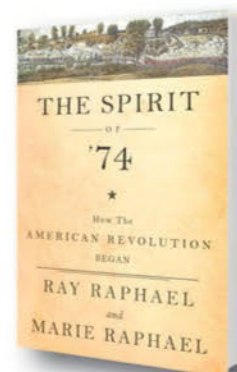


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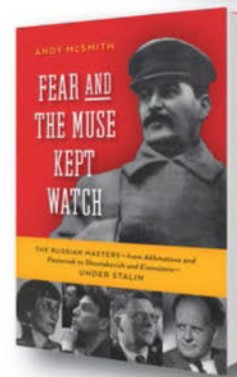


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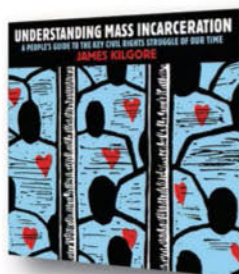
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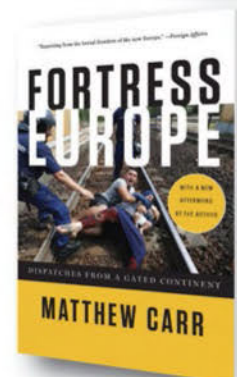
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# Reimagining Journalism: The Story of the One Percent

Michael Massing

1.

Despite fizzling out within months, Occupy Wall Street succeeded in changing the terms of political discussion in America. Inequality, the concentration of wealth, the one percent, the new Gilded Age—all became fixtures of national debate thanks in part to the protesters who camped out in Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan. Even the Republican presidential candidates have felt compelled to address the matter. News organizations, meanwhile, have produced regular reports on the fortunes of the wealthy, the struggles of the middle class, and the travails of those left behind.

Even amid the outpouring of coverage of rising income inequality, however, the richest Americans have remained largely hidden from view. On all sides, billionaires are shaping policy, influencing opinion, promoting favorite causes, polishing their images—and carefully shielding themselves from scrutiny. Journalists have largely let them get away with it. News organizations need to find new ways to lift the veil off the superrich and lay bare their power and influence. Digital technology, with its flexibility, speed, boundless capacity, and ease of interactivity, seems ideally suited to this task, but only if it's used more creatively than it has been to date.

Consider, for instance, DealBook, the online daily financial report of *The New York Times*. It has a staff of twelve reporters plus a half-dozen columnists covering investment banking, mergers and acquisitions, private equity, hedge funds, venture capital, and regulatory matters. Every day, DealBook posts a dozen or so pieces on the *Times* website, some of which also appear in the print edition, making it seem a good vehicle for showing how Wall Street really works.

Unfortunately, it only intermittently delivers. Most DealBook postings are narrowly framed, with a heavy emphasis on CEO comings and goings, earnings and expectations, buyouts and IPOs. Some sample headlines: “BB&T Is New Deal-Making Powerhouse in Banking.” “Investors Hope to Ride Swell of SoulCycle Fever in Coming IPO.” “Dell Is the Straw That Stirs Tech M&A.” “Strong Profit for Bank of America, and Investors See Signs of Progress.” Some pieces veer into outright boosterism. A long feature on “How Jonathan Steinberg Made Good on a Second Chance,” for instance, described in admiring detail how this mogul, through a combination of pluck and savvy, built his asset management firm into “one of the fastest-growing fund companies around.”

DealBook's founder and editor, Andrew Ross Sorkin, is known for his closeness to Wall Street executives (many of whom serve as sources of information), and it often shows in his weekly column. In one that appeared on October 3, 2011, two weeks after the start of Occupy Wall Street, he explained that he had decided to visit

Zuccotti Park after getting a call from the chief executive of a major bank:

“Is this Occupy Wall Street thing a big deal?” the CEO asked me. I didn't have an answer. “We're trying to figure out how much we should be worried about all of this,” he continued, clearly concerned. “Is this going to turn into a personal safety problem?”



Billionaire hedge fund manager Paul Singer, who has contributed millions of dollars to Republican causes and recently endorsed Marco Rubio for president, with DealBook founder Andrew Ross Sorkin at a conference in New York City, December 2014

After speaking with some of the occupiers, Sorkin concluded that the bankers were not in imminent danger, though he warned that they did have to grapple with the demonstrators' demands for accountability for the financial crisis and growing inequality.

Sorkin sometimes writes critically of Wall Street (as in a recent column expressing skepticism about the sustainability of the current merger wave), and DealBook as a whole has become far more critical of the financial industry than it once was. In 2013, for instance, Eric Lipton and Ben Protess revealed how a section of a bill weakening a key clause in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act was written almost word-for-word by Citibank. In 2014, DealBook ran a series about how Wall Street is financing a potential bubble in subprime auto loans, with the poor hit especially hard, and this past November it ran three long articles about how arbitration clauses buried in millions of contracts bar Americans from joining together in class-action suits, effectively depriving them of the right to take companies to court.

DealBook routinely reports on criminal probes into corporate wrongdoing, such as the investigation of Libor, the interest-rate-rigging case involving London banks and the standard rate. It also keeps track of the revolving door between Washington and Wall Street, like the hiring in March of former Federal Reserve board member Jer-

emy Stein by the BlueMountain Capital Management hedge fund. As well, DealBook has been thoroughly chronicling the recent turbulence in the hedge fund world.

As DealBook's name indicates, though, its overriding concern is deals, and though its coverage of them provides much useful information for the large number of people working on or investing in Wall Street, the site does not

to the right. The online version of the story featured a map showing where these families live, photos of some of their mansions, and a list of all 158 donors along with the sums they've given, gleaned from FEC and IRS filings.

It's encouraging to see the *Times* devote more resources to covering the wealthy. Even so, its approach seems too limited and scattershot. After running the story about the 158 powerful families, for instance, the paper moved on, with little follow-up. As a result, the impact of its reporting was not as deep or lasting as it could have been. The problem is hardly limited to the *Times*. In American journalism as a whole, the coverage of the superrich is far too sporadic, fleeting, and unimaginative to make a real difference. News organizations need to develop a new methodology that can allow them to document the structure of wealth, power, and influence in America—to show how the ultrarich make their money, what they do with it, and to what effect. The coverage needs to be more sustained, ambitious, and broadly conceived. And digital technology can help.

2.

To get an idea of how journalists might proceed, imagine for a moment that DealBook decided to adopt a new approach dedicated to revealing the power and influence of the financial elite. What might it look like? A good starting point is a DealBook posting that appeared in May on the “Top 5 Hedge Fund Earners.” For each, DealBook provided his 2014 earnings along with a brief biographical note. Heading the list was Kenneth Griffin, the CEO of the Chicago-based Citadel, whose income for the year came to a whopping \$1.3 billion. Here in full was the accompanying note: “Mr. Griffin started by trading convertible bonds out of his dormitory at Harvard. His firm, Citadel, posted returns of 18 percent to investors in its flagship Kensington and Wellington funds.”

Appearing beneath the note was a link to two *Times* articles. One of them, from July 24, 2014, described the acrimonious divorce proceedings between Griffin and his wife, Anne Dias Griffin, who ran her own investment firm and who had helped elevate her husband's status in the art world. The other article, dated April 2, 2015, described Griffin's contribution of more than \$1 million to Rahm Emanuel's campaign for his second term as mayor of Chicago. It mentioned some of the large political donations Griffin has made in the past, including the more than \$13 million he gave to Bruce Rauner, a Republican, in his successful campaign for governor of Illinois in 2014. The piece also noted that Griffin has given \$150 million to Harvard College for its financial aid program and spent \$30 million for two apartments in the Waldorf Astoria Chicago.

While useful, this information barely scratched the surface of Griffin's



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influence. Going online, I tried to piece together a fuller picture. According to the *Chicago Business Journal*, Griffin is considered the richest person in Illinois. A post on CNBC's website said that Citadel's recent success "has arguably made Griffin the most powerful figure in hedge funds." Unfortunately, it did not say what forms that power takes. At OpenSecrets.org—the excellent database of the Center for Responsive Politics—Griffin and his then wife are listed as the thirteenth-largest contributor to Super PACs in 2014, with large sums going to both American Crossroads (cofounded by Karl Rove) and America Rising, which does opposition research on Democratic candidates.

OpenSecrets.org also noted that earlier this year Citadel hired former Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke to serve as an adviser. "Citadel's employment of Bernanke," it stated, "is far from the first illustration of the revolving door that former regulators and legislators swing through on their way to Wall Street." While Bernanke has said that he is "sensitive" to that perception, the site went on, his "access and influence in D.C. may be as valuable as his expertise." (In fairness, the news of Bernanke's hiring was broken by Andrew Ross Sorkin and Alexandra Stevenson in the *Times*.)

From *Muckety*, a website that uses digital technology to create maps showing paths of influence, I learned that Griffin is a trustee of both the Art Institute of Chicago and the Whitney Museum; a director of the Economic Club of Chicago; an advisory board member of the Eurasia Group, a risk-assessment firm; a trustee of the University of Chicago; and a member of the Committee on Capital Markets Regulation. *Muckety* did not, however, offer any details about the nature of Griffin's participation in these institutions or the influence he might have over them. What kind of sway, I wondered, does he have on the operations of the Whitney? How much influence does his trusteeship at the University of Chicago give him? How powerful is the Economic Club of Chicago, and what part does Griffin play there?

I was especially curious about the Committee on Capital Markets Regulation, which I'd never heard of. Going to its website, I discovered that it's yet another of the dozens of trade groups and associations dedicated to protecting Wall Street's interests in Washington. Others include the Financial Markets Association, the Financial Services Roundtable, the Global Financial Markets Association, the Institute for Financial Markets, the Private Equity Growth Capital Council, and the Securities Industry Finance Markets Association. All of these organizations have powerful boards, sizable budgets, and considerable influence, yet no one is watching them. Members of the Committee on Capital Markets Regulation, I found, include such prominent figures as Glenn Hubbard, the dean of the Columbia Business School; Abigail Johnson, the CEO of Fidelity (whose estimated worth is \$11 billion); John Thornton, the former president of Goldman Sachs, the current head of the world's largest gold-mining company, and the cochair of the Brookings Institution's board of trustees; and Paul Singer, the CEO of Elliott Management, another prominent hedge fund.

Looking more closely at these individuals, I became fascinated with Singer. He seems to typify the ability of today's ultrarich to amass tremendous power while remaining out of the limelight. Singer did receive a flurry of attention in late October when news broke of his decision to back Marco Rubio's presidential bid, but it quickly faded, and he moved back into the shadows. Going online, I found out (from *Forbes*) that Singer is worth about \$2 billion. He is the single largest donor to the Republican Party, with his money going overwhelmingly to candidates who support free enterprise and oppose regulation. (A major exception is his support for groups promoting gay rights and same-sex marriage; his son is gay.)

From the *Times* I learned that the fund-raisers Singer hosts in his apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side can net more than \$1 million a session, and I read in *The Wall Street Journal* that he was instrumental in the selection of Paul Ryan as Mitt Romney's running mate in 2012. In a detailed profile of Singer in *Mother Jones*, Peter Stone noted that Elliott Management has frequently been called a "vulture fund" because a chunk of its profits comes from buying distressed companies' or countries' debt at a steep discount." In 2012 a subsidiary of the firm, seeking to extract full payment from Argentina for some bonds on which it had defaulted, had an Argentine naval vessel impounded in a Ghanaian port. In 2004, Singer contributed \$5,000 to Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, which attacked John Kerry's war record, badly damaging his presidential bid. Since then, he has given generously to American Crossroads and the Club for Growth, an anti-tax group that has backed many Tea Party candidates.

Singer's influence, though, extends far beyond that. He is chairman of the board of the Manhattan Institute, a member of the board of *Commentary* magazine, and a major donor to the American Enterprise Institute. He has given to and/or sat on the boards of several organizations dedicated to a strong Israel, including the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs; the Republican Jewish Coalition; the American Israel Education Foundation, an affiliate of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee that sponsors trips to Israel by members of Congress; and the Israel Project, a group dedicated to boosting Israel's image. From 2008 to 2011, Singer gave \$3.6 million to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which has worked tirelessly to isolate and sanction Iran.

All of these groups were active in the campaign to kill the nuclear deal with Iran. As I examined their interlocking boards and overlapping missions, I became aware of the enormous political, financial, and lobbying infrastructure behind that campaign. From Paul Blumenthal at *The Huffington Post* I learned that four hawkish-on-Israel billionaires—Singer, Sheldon Adelson, Home Depot founder Bernard Marcus, and Seth Klarman, the head of the private investment house Baupost—gave a combined \$11.5 million to anti-Iran groups from 2011 through 2013 (while also giving \$115 million to Republican Party Super PACs in the 2012 and 2014

elections). A parallel array of groups (led by J Street and the Ploughshares Fund) worked to support the deal, but as Eli Clifton pointed out at *LobeLog*, the anti-Iran groups opposing it had operating budgets nearly five times as large as those in support.

Despite the nonstop coverage of the debate over the nuclear agreement, this network remained largely hidden. And though the deal ultimately went through, the network remains intact and determined to block its implementation, so its work deserves ongoing attention. Digital technology offers a good means of providing it. Through it, a page could be created listing the many organiza-



Zephyr Teachout during her campaign for governor against Andrew Cuomo, New York City, September 2014

tions working to affect US policy on Israel and Iran, both conservative and liberal, with information provided on the main participants, funders, and lobbyists of each. Through the use of links, the many ties between these organizations could be shown, with special attention paid to the one group that towers over all the rest—AIPAC.

### 3.

Establishing such a page would range far beyond the mandate of DealBook. What's needed, I think, is a more broadly based site dedicated to covering the power elite. *Muckety*, along with three other eye-on-the-elite groups, *LittleSis*, *SourceWatch*, and *RightWeb*, are all useful, but they are underfunded, overmatched, and (at times) ideologically oriented. A new site with an experienced staff of reporters, editors, and digital whizzes could burrow deep into the world of the one percent and document the remarkable impact they are having on so many areas of American life. As information on them is gathered, it could be incorporated into a database that could become the go-to site for information about the nation's elite and their power.

To return to Paul Singer, such a website would offer a full accounting of his far-reaching influence. It would, for instance, delve into his work in the field of education, using it as a springboard into an examination of the close but opaque

ties between hedge funds, charter schools, and New York politics. Whichever side one takes in the great debate over charter schools, the movement to promote them has become a potent political force whose activities and backers often remain in the shadows.

A website could document how, in the fall of 2014, Singer gave \$500,000 to a hastily assembled PAC called New Yorkers for a Balanced Albany, the goal of which was to elect Republicans to the New York State Senate and keep that body in their hands. The PAC was organized by StudentsFirstNY, an advocacy group that supports charter schools, the expanded use of standardized testing, the linking of teachers' pay to test results, and other elements of the so-called education reform movement. StudentsFirstNY was founded by Joel Klein, the schools chancellor under Michael Bloomberg; Michelle Rhee, the former Washington, D.C., schools chancellor; and the billionaire hedge fund managers Daniel Loeb and Paul Tudor Jones.

The PAC was set up out of the fear that if the Democrats won control of both houses of the New York State legislature, they would approve measures to limit the growth of charter schools. Singer was one of about a dozen financial titans who together donated more than \$4 million to the PAC, which used the money to mount an intensive lobbying and ad blitz in the weeks prior to the November 2014 election. (Democratic candidates were backed by some \$3.6 million from the political arm of the state teachers' union.)

While working to elect Republican state legislators, these same hedge fund managers also contributed millions of dollars to back Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo in his reelection bid. Given the strong support of those managers for charter schools, their contributions may help explain why Cuomo has so vigorously backed the expansion of such schools in the face of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio's effort to curtail them and instead concentrate on public schools. (De Blasio's position, in turn, was no doubt influenced by the strong backing he had received from the teachers' unions.) StudentsFirstNY is now amassing a war chest to promote charter schools in the 2016 legislative elections, and in June Singer gave \$1 million to its political action committee.

I learned about that contribution from a story appearing in July in *The New York Times*. Its focus was StudentsFirstNY and its efforts to keep alive Michael Bloomberg's education agenda, which particularly favors charter schools; the information about the sums donated by Singer and other hedge fund managers was buried deep in the article and easily overlooked.

Online, I found a more pointed account by the Washington Park Project, a public policy group. Titled "Corruption in Education: Hedge Funds and the Takeover of New York's Schools," it was written by Mohammad Khan and Zephyr Teachout, the Fordham Law professor who ran for governor against Cuomo in 2014. The study offered an eye-opening look at the large sums being spent by what it called "a tiny group of powerful hedge fund execu-

Andrew Burton/Getty Images



tives” seeking to “take over education policy” in the state. This “lightning war on public education,” they wrote, was “hasty and secretive” and “driven by unaccountable private individuals. It represents a new form of political power, and therefore requires a new kind of political oversight.”

Teachout and Khan argued that the activities of this group stood in the way of addressing a major obstacle to improving public education in New York State—educational inequity. According to them, “the state is at least \$5.9 billion short on its constitutional obligations to its public school children,” which has led to overcrowding and related problems. “Strong public school funding,” they added, “is necessary to ensure small class sizes, arts, sports, counseling, and a rich supportive environment for all children. But billionaire charter champions and their lobbyists have actively worked against it, and even praised massive cuts to public schools.”

Teachout and Khan did not, however, explore the question of why. The enthusiasm with which so many hedge fund managers and other Wall Street executives have embraced charter schools remains something of a mystery. Even if one accepts the premise that America’s public schools are often broken and that many teachers are not up to the job, why have so many billionaires concluded that charter schools are the best way to fix the system? And what are the implications of having such a small group with so little expertise in the field of education exercising such

influence in it? The type of website I have in mind would address such questions. Through investigation, analysis, links, tables, charts, and interviews, it would examine the nexus between Wall Street and charter schools, showing how it works and what drives it.

Education policy at the national level deserves similar watching. The nation’s K–12 policy has been strongly shaped by three foundations. One is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which, with assets of more than \$40 billion, is by far the largest philanthropic institution in the world. Over the last fifteen years, it has given billions to promote standardized testing, merit pay for teachers, charter schools, the Common Core, and other elements of the education reform movement. The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation has concentrated on training superintendents and administrators who subscribe to the principles of that movement and seek to carry them out on the ground. And the Walton Family Foundation (endowed with Walmart money) has since 2000 given more than \$1 billion to charter schools as well as to organizations like Teach for America and Families for Excellent Schools, an aggressive advocacy group with close ties to Eva Moskowitz, the controversial head of Success Academy charter schools, whose board includes many Wall Street executives.

Arne Duncan, while serving as the head of Chicago’s public schools, joined the board of the Broad Center, a training division of the Broad Foundation. The foundation’s 2009 report stated that the election of Barack Obama as president and his appointment of

Duncan as secretary of education

marked the pinnacle of hope for our work in education reform.... With an agenda that echoes our decade of investments—charter schools, performance pay for teachers, accountability, expanded learning time and national standards—the Obama administration is poised to cultivate and bring to fruition the seeds we and other reformers have planted.

As secretary, Duncan filled many top positions with people with ties to both Broad and Gates.\*

The policy implications of all this were nicely summed up in an interview I found on YouTube with Stanley Katz, a professor of public affairs at Princeton and a longtime student of nonprofits. These megafoundations, he said, “have been able to leverage their resources in such a way that their policies have been adopted by state boards of education, local boards of education, and the federal Department of Education.” The result is that “the K–12 policy of these megafoundations is pretty much the K–12 policy of the United States of America.” It’s an illustration, Katz said, of how in today’s America private money can buy public policy.

The activities of these foundations have not gone unscrutinized by the press. In April 2014, for instance, the *Times* ran a long front-page analysis of the efforts by the Walton Family Found-

\*For more on this, see Joanne Barkan, “Got Dough? How Billionaires Rule Our Schools,” *Dissent*, Winter 2011.

ation to promote charter schools; in September of that same year, the *Times Magazine* featured a cover story by Andrew Ross Sorkin about Bill Gates’s efforts to remake the teaching of history. The online *Hechinger Report* offers periodic posts on the Gates Foundation, and in these pages Diane Ravitch has sharply analyzed the record of the education reform movement.

Given the power of that movement, however, far more attention is needed. A website examining the structure of money and influence in America could provide it. It would try to produce an ongoing record of the activities of the foundations and private donors trying to affect education policy—tracking the major participants, showing the links between them, assessing their influence and impact, and analyzing the evidence on the performance of both public and charter schools. The political and lobbying efforts of the teachers’ unions and their allies would be included as well, showing how much money and influence they are able to mobilize in elections and for what candidates. The site could also serve as a sounding board for people in the field, encouraging principals, teachers, parents, and grantees to send in comments about their dealings with these institutions. The most thoughtful could be edited and posted on the site, providing a bottom-up perspective that rarely gets aired.

Education is but one area of American life that is being transformed by Big Money. In a subsequent article, I will look at the growing power of philanthropy and suggest new ways in which journalists can cover it. □

—This is the first of two articles.

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# Forward Passes

Darryl Pinckney

## Loving Day

by Mat Johnson.

Spiegel and Grau, 287 pp., \$26.00

The importing of human beings into the US from Africa to be sold as slaves was outlawed in 1808, after which the slave markets of the southern states traded in black people born in America. The rules of New World slavery decreed that a person's status was derived from that of the mother, not the father. A slave owner's children by an enslaved woman were, firstly, assets. Neither Frederick Douglass nor Booker T. Washington considered himself mixed-race, because of the one-drop rule that determined how much black blood made a person black. They loathed the thought of their slave-owning white fathers. Douglass never saw his mother's face in the daylight, because she was always going to or coming back from the fields in the dark.

What outraged white southerners about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not only that Harriet Beecher Stowe asserted that black people were better Christians than white people; she was also frank about the immorality of the white man's relations with the black women in his power. But Stowe had as much trouble as Lincoln in imagining the social destiny of mixed-race people who were pink enough in fact to pass for white (a problem central to Mat Johnson's brilliantly satirical new novel *Loving Day*).

In his book *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937), Sterling Brown called James Fenimore Cooper's Cora Munro in *The Last of the Mohicans* "the mother of all tragic mulattoes." The landfill of American literature includes numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels and plays—by white authors—sometimes condemning, but mostly sorrowing for those racial outcasts who don't fit in with the black masses but won't ever be accepted by white society either. "Miscegenation" and "mulatto" are terms of denigration, and the beautiful, doomed mulatto—usually a woman—typically dies after she is exposed before the unsuspecting white man who is about to marry her.

William Wells Brown wrote his fugitive slave narrative and went on to publish in London in 1853 the first novel by an African-American, *Clotel; or The President's Daughter*. *Clotel* is the child of Thomas Jefferson by his mulatto housekeeper, a suggestion of the gossip about Sally Hemings in historical black America. In Brown's first edition, *Clotel* leaps to her death in the Potomac rather than be taken back into slavery and concubinage. However, her daughter is reunited in France with the blue-eyed black man she had loved when they were both in bondage. In the edition of Brown's novel published in 1867, *Clotel* turns down marriage to a white man in order to become a nurse for Union troops.

Brown named the three possible fates for the mulatto in American literature: death, exile, or renunciation. In the novels of Frances E.W. Harper and Pauline Hopkins, late-nineteenth-century black writers, the black heroines with rosebud mouths who could have passed for white are proud to



Carrie Mae Weems/Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Carrie Mae Weems: *May Flowers*, 2002; from 'The Memory of Time,' a recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. The catalog is by Sarah Greenough, Andrea Nelson, and others, and is published by the museum and Thames and Hudson.

choose service to their race as teachers over marriage to white men. Black writers were reinterpreting stereotypes.

In James Weldon Johnson's novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), a black man who has succeeded in passing for white his entire life, a widower and successful businessman with children, writes his confession, because denying his true racial identity has cost him his soul. In Nella Larsen's bleak comedy of manners, *Passing* (1929), the decision to pass is understood as an individual solution to a mass problem, racial discrimination; but the black woman looking at the reckless acquaintance whose white husband does not know he is married to a black woman does not give her away. Larsen, herself something of a tragic mulatto, had sophistication, but passing as a subject in popular culture was the stuff of melodrama. "Once a Pancake," Sterling Brown called his review of Fannie Hurst's best seller *Imitation of Life* (1933), which was twice made into a film.

By that time passing seemed obsolete. The carnage of World War I undermined Social Darwinism; fear of racial mongrelization seemed extremist as a theme. After all, not every mixed-race person looked white; not everyone was desperate to be white; and much Harlem Renaissance writing stresses the varieties of blackness, the different skin tones on display in the ghetto streets. If either you or the law said you were black, then blackness was a shared condition, no matter how light-skinned you were.

Nevertheless, in 1935, Langston Hughes was hopeful of Broadway success with his play *Mulatto*. That old southern problem: What does a white man do with his black son by his be-

loved mistress now that his son has grown up and refuses to accept his place as a black man? The son kills his father and his mother holds off the lynch mob as her son prepares to kill himself. In novels and plays about passing, effortful attempts are sometimes made to say that these unions had been loving, if socially impossible.

But the unions that produced the unhappy offspring have already taken place, offstage. There is a reason Faulkner's mulatto characters are silent men. Hughes included stories about passing in his collection *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), but he also dealt with interracial romance, which was daring. Then the Communist Party brought interracial sex into American literature in a way that the libidinous Jazz Age had not, apart from the writings of Jean Toomer. In 1934, the Party's Harlem branch sent its white male comrades to dancing classes so that the black women would have guys to dance with at Party socials, because the black men got so busy with the white women comrades.

Richard Wright, Chester Himes, William Gardner Smith, Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry—the immediate postwar generation of black writers, some of whom had served their literary apprenticeships at Party publications—and white novelists such as Lillian Smith and William Styron assaulted the ultimate taboo, writing fictions that concerned interracial intimacy, as a way of challenging the existing social order. To write about interracial love was considered one of the triumphs of American realism; it was seen as telling more of the truth about the black side of things. But for the succeeding waves of black novelists, from James Baldwin and Paule Marshall to Cecil Brown and Andrea Lee, the interracial love affair became a problem of black identity.

This happened before black feminist theory in the late 1970s proclaimed the difference between the experiences of black women and white women and therefore helped to usher in the era of identity politics.

Black conservatives in the 1990s presented themselves as brave dissenters from a juggernaut black-militant, ghetto-determined definition of blackness. They complained about the conformism of black unity; they demanded that blackness be privatized, so to speak, because what they really didn't like was the liberalism of a black voting bloc. But they were exploiting a crisis of black youth in integrated classrooms. Who you were supposed to be as a black person in these classes seemed too restrictive of what many felt they now contained.

The mixed-race children of the civil rights era and the Second Reconstruction of the 1970s have come of age. Stories about multicultural upbringings and dual heritages have been written for a while now, as autobiography and fiction. The target this time around is not the fantasy of Anglo-Saxon purity, but rather assumptions of black identity. The concerns are sometimes the same as those in the literature about being black and middle-class. What constitutes authentic blackness and who is entitled to say? Race is an unasked-for existentialism.

In *Loving Day*, "racial patriotism" is just one of the torments that Mat Johnson's mixed-race narrator must confront. After a considerable absence, Warren Duffy has returned from Wales to his hometown, Philadelphia. Duffy's mother was black. She died when he was a child. His white father, of Irish descent, has recently died, leaving Duffy a historic but derelict house on seven acres in Germantown, since the 1970s a depressed, mostly black neighborhood.

Duffy, who looks white, can sound black when he needs to. "People aren't social, they're tribal. Race doesn't exist, but tribes are fucking real." He left behind in Wales a failed marriage and a failed comic book shop—he drew comics himself. He must renovate and sell the Germantown property in order to pay off his former wife, but he also needs a home for the teenage daughter he never knew he had. If he can get her through her last year of high school and into college then he might begin to redeem himself in his own eyes.

The girl, Tal, has been passing for white without knowing it, brought up by her Jewish grandfather. Her mother has been dead for years. Duffy hadn't seen her since they met as high school students. He stopped calling her and never learned she'd gotten pregnant. Tal's fatally ill grandfather discovers that Duffy is back in Philadelphia. He hands over his granddaughter, who looks less like her maternal cousins the older she gets. "So, I'm a black. That's just fucking great. A black."

In Wales, Duffy had "never felt blacker." "I don't like feeling white. It makes me feel robbed. Of my heritage. Of my true self. Of my mother." Tal enrolls in an ultra-hippie school for



mixed-race students, the Mélange Center, a collection of trailers squatting in a public park. Duffy, with no prospects as a comic book artist, ends up teaching at the Mélange Center, which he calls “Mulattopia.” He is skeptical about its biracial cultural indoctrination of embracing all of one’s ethnic makeup. “Oreos” are black on the outside and white on the inside, but “Sunflowers” are yellow and light surrounding a black core:

There are mulattoes in America who look white and also socialize as white. White-looking mulattoes whose friends are mostly white, who consume the same music and television and books and films as most whites, whose political views are less than a shade apart from the whites as well. They ain’t here. Those mulattoes whose white appearance matches up with the white world they inhabit, those mulattoes aren’t coming to Mulattopia. The world already fits well enough for them.

Those mulattoes who look definitively African American and are fully at home within the African American community—they aren’t here either. Those mulattoes who look clearly black and hang black and are in full embrace of black culture—nope, they’re not here, nowhere to be found. If they were they would denounce this lot of sellouts. I know I would. I can hear them from the place they have in my consciousness.

Duffy carries a torch for the black woman who turned him down and mar-

ried a black policeman instead—until he embarks on a passionate affair with his daughter’s dance teacher, a free spirit, a high yellow like himself. When Duffy meets her other boyfriend, he thinks:

He’s probably one of those white guys who think they’re enlightened just because they’ve realized the obvious fact that black women are beautiful. He’s probably one of those white guys who think poking their pink members in black women will somehow cure racism. I don’t trust interracial couples. I don’t even trust the one that made me: I think of who my father was, who my mother was, and have no idea why they first hooked up, let alone fell in love. I don’t know if I’m the by-product of a racialized eroticism or a romantic rebellion of societal norms. I’m fine with mixed-race unions that *just happen*, are formed when two people randomly connect. But there are other kinds of interracial couplings with suspect motivation, with connections based on fetishizing of black sexuality, or internalized white supremacy.

The other woman pulling Duffy into the unknown is the older Jewish director of the center itself, “the great matriarch of the new people.” The loopy faculty and other mixed-race students become less like a substitute family for his daughter in Duffy’s eyes and much more like a cult that will derail her life. He plots a desperate act to save her during celebrations of what the school

proclaims as the national holiday of mixed-race Americans, “Loving Day”:

In 1958, eighteen-year-old Mildred Jeter got knocked up by her boyfriend, Richard Loving, a family friend six years older than she, and they decided the best thing to do next was get married. They drove up from Central Point, Virginia, to Washington, D.C., because Richard was a white guy and Virginia had a law called the Racial Integrity Act of 1924 that said white people and black people couldn’t get married.

Soon after they got back, the police raided their home in the dark of night, hoping to catch them in the act of fucking, because that was illegal too—which is really ironic when you reflect that the God of Virginia is Thomas Jefferson. They were sentenced to a year in prison, but allowed to have that downgraded to probation as long as they agreed to leave the state and never come back. Six years later, sick of not being able to see their family and broke in D.C., they decided to sue the State of Virginia. It took three years for the Supreme Court to rule in their favor, but it did unanimously, and *Loving v. Virginia* became the case that decriminalized interracial marriage in America.

Warren Duffy is irresistible in his masculine vulnerabilities, a seductive loser. The appeal of *Loving Day* is largely in his tone, the fluency of his de-

spair, his flair as an analyst of race and of himself. “Half-European. Whiteness—that’s not really something you can be half of. That’s more of an all or nothing privilege, perspective thing.” But the black woman he used to love is someone who has made up her mind about what race is. Any discussion of it would be an attack on her reality. “Apparently not just black and white people are sleeping together,” Duffy says of the new mixed-race combos possible in America today. He tells her that black people get uncomfortable when they don’t get to have the final say on race in America, and she warns that he is lost in some “crazy Oreo shit,” because “quitting blackness” is of no help in a time of crisis, when black boys are being used for target practice by white cops and the prisons are “overflowing with victims of white judgment.”

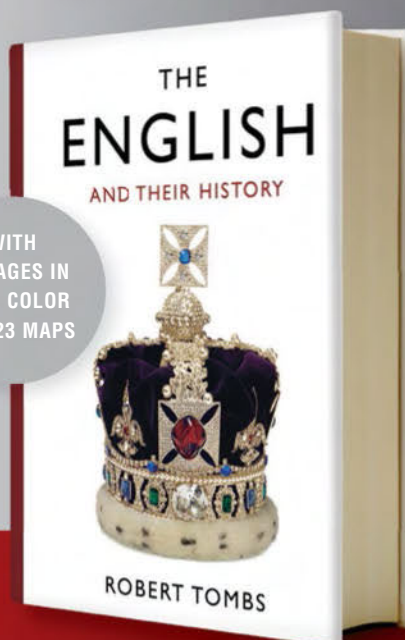
Mat Johnson was born in Philadelphia in 1970. His first novel, *Drop* (2000), relates a young black commercial artist’s attempt to escape Philadelphia and make a life in England. Johnson himself is of mixed-race parentage. In his second novel, *Hunting in Harlem* (2003), he tried his hand at mystery writing, his hero an ex-con. In his third, *Incognegro* (2008)—a graphic novel that he created with the artist Warren Pleece, and based perhaps on the experiences of the head of the NAACP, Walter White—a black reporter in the 1930s light enough to pass for white investigates lynchings down South.

Johnson wrote a long, lively essay on the brutal suppression of a suspected slave rebellion in eighteenth-century New York, *The Great Negro*

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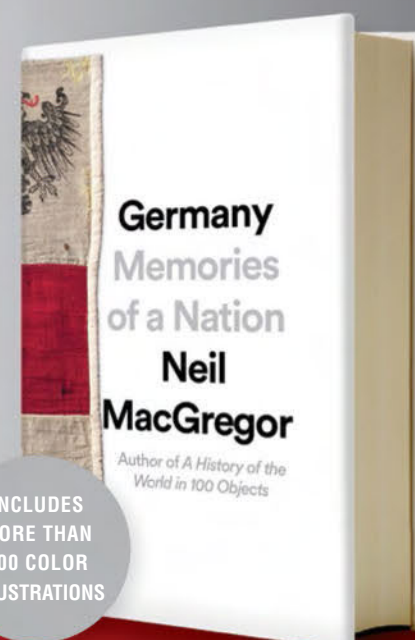


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—*The Sunday Times*



*Plot* (2007). His previous novel, *Pym* (2011), is an ambitious response to Edgar Allan Poe's weird 1838 novel that has black people inhabiting the South Pole, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*.

Johnson is able to interrogate black history. In *Loving Day*, the one-drop rule is being undermined, shown to be anachronistic; nevertheless he makes it clear that all black people ought to abide in the ship, as black anti-colonialist societies in Philadelphia in

the early nineteenth century opposed to emigration to Africa urged. You could think of Mat Johnson alongside Wesley Brown, Paul Beatty, Colson Whitehead, John Keene, or Percival Everett. To call them black satirists or humorists wouldn't quite cover it. In their ease with genre and their consciousness that the language they're after is literary, they descend through the allegory of Ralph Ellison, not the realism of Richard Wright. But they have inherited Wright's social vision,

not Ellison's. "I know you're beige, but stay black," a friend says to Warren Duffy.

Duffy's father's house is haunted. At first, Duffy thinks crackheads are trespassing, but soon Johnson makes it clear that Duffy and a few others have seen the ghosts of the black man and the white woman floating in the air, fucking, "the first interracial couple." In the end, Duffy isn't afraid of them. He sees what they are, were. "Just lovers. Just people."

In 1857, Frank J. Webb, a black writer from Philadelphia, published in London *The Garies and Their Friends*, a novel about the fortunes of two families, one interracial, the other black. A white planter and his mulatto mistress move for the sake of their children from Georgia to Philadelphia, where racism can be just as violent as in the South. The son who passes for white dies of shame, rejected like a tragic mulatto heroine. His sisters who marry black survive. □

## Under Lock & Key: How Long?

Aryeh Neier and David J. Rothman

Although few people are satisfied with the quality of mental health services in the US, it is still startling to find physicians and psychiatrists enthusiastically calling for a return to asylums. One might think that the grim history of confinement would have precluded such advocacy. Whether in popular imagination (think of *The Snake Pit* or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), historical literature (Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*), or legislation (exemplified by the Americans with Disabilities Act), the asylum seemed to represent yesterday's nightmare.

Nevertheless, last winter, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* ran an editorial titled in part "Bring Back the Asylum,"<sup>1</sup> and a few weeks later, a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece endorsed it. In this same spirit, Massachusetts recently invested \$300 million in a new mental hospital, the Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital. Are the failures of community services so extreme and beyond repair as to justify recreating asylums?

The bleak history of asylums is worth recalling. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, widespread and exaggerated optimism about the ability of well-ordered institutions to cure insanity led state after state to build asylums. Initially, they were points of pride, with some claiming 100 percent cures, but within forty years, they deteriorated into custodial facilities. Untrained and unsupervised staff stood guard over patient populations that were predominantly composed of immigrants, many of them elderly. Periodic exposés documented gross overcrowding and mistreatment but did not lead to corrective action. Legislatures, content to rid the streets of troublesome individuals, kept their appropriations meager.

During the first half of the twentieth century, state hospitals became more and more overcrowded and understaffed. In New York and Massachusetts, for example, they held patients far in excess of capacity. During 1925, there was an excess of 27 percent in New York and 14 percent in Massachusetts. On average, there was one physician for every 250 patients, so the institutions were almost entirely custodial. To make matters worse, they became a preferred



Olivia de Havilland and Betsy Blair as inmates at a mental hospital in *The Snake Pit*, 1948

site for human experimentation. Superintendents approved the research programs and patients had neither the capacity nor the opportunity to say no; to researchers' delight, there was no effective oversight of the work. In World War II, mental hospitals were the setting for experiments with malaria and flu; patients were purposely infected with the diseases so that the efficacy of experimental drugs could be evaluated. Immediately after the war, the institutions were used for vitamin experiments. Researchers restricted patient diets to induce vitamin deficiencies so that they could investigate the adverse effects. What better way to learn that without vitamin B, patients developed lesions, physical infirmities, and neurological problems?<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the 1960s, a process of deinstitutionalization began, the result of an unlikely combination of factors. One was the advent of new pharmaceuticals that controlled psychotic episodes, thereby enabling some of the mentally ill to stabilize their lives outside the asylums. Second, many states saw a fi-

nancial advantage in reducing the size of the mental hospital population—the primary goal was not to benefit patients but to reduce expenditures. Not only would mental health agency budgets shrink but, if discharged patients were placed in private nursing homes, federal Medicaid dollars would share the costs.

Ronald Reagan was particularly successful in implementing this strategy in California. Indeed, Reagan further benefited because some proprietors of the nursing homes, which were often for-profit institutions, became financial contributors to his political campaigns. States promised to deliver more mental health services to mentally impaired people in these communities; but as we shall see, this promise was not often kept.

Third, and perhaps most essential to the deinstitutionalization movement, was the litigation brought by civil liberties lawyers. Some became involved because of their concerns for patients who wanted to challenge their compulsory confinement in institutions or who wanted to resist the forced consumption of psychoactive drugs or regimens of electroshock therapy. Some lawyers were appalled by the wretched conditions in state mental hospitals and the even worse conditions in facilities for the mentally disabled. In 1967, the New York Civil Liberties Union established a pioneering project on Civil Liberties and Mental Illness. In 1973, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Center on Law and Social Policy (a Washington-

based public interest group), and the American Orthopsychiatric Association created the Mental Health Law Project (MHLP), aimed at helping people living in wretched conditions, many in state institutions.

One lawyer, the late Bruce Ennis, became a central figure in establishing the legal standards both for involuntary confinement and for conditions of confinement. Among his most noteworthy cases was *O'Connor v. Donaldson*, which he argued before the Supreme Court in 1975. The plaintiff, Kenneth Donaldson, a carpenter, had been committed to a Florida mental hospital after his elderly father petitioned a state court to hold a sanity hearing for his son. The finding was that Donaldson suffered from paranoid schizophrenia; after a very brief hearing, the judge remanded him to the Florida State Hospital, an institution with some five thousand inmates. Donaldson rarely saw a physician there during fifteen years of confinement. When he did, he claimed, the encounters were brief. Typically, the physician asked three questions: "What ward are you on?" "Are you taking medication?" "Are you working any place?" "That will be all."

Wanting his freedom, Donaldson sent many petitions to courts; one of them succeeded in his being given a hearing, and the case wound its way to the Supreme Court. The institution defended itself by arguing that Donaldson had received "milieu therapy," that is, he had benefited from confinement in the mental hospital. Ennis argued for him, and the Supreme Court decided unanimously that "a State cannot constitutionally confine, without [treatment], a nondangerous individual who is capable of surviving safely in freedom by himself or with the help of willing and responsible family members or friends." Thus, state authority to decide who could be confined to a mental hospital began to be circumscribed.

Another case that Ennis argued, *Wyatt v. Stickney* (1971), before federal judge Frank Johnson in Alabama, helped define the responsibilities for treatment in state mental hospitals. Patients could not simply be kept under lock and key. They had a legal "right to treatment," and courts were duty-bound to enforce the standard. Were it not met, the courts were to consider the ways that patients could be released. Ennis also helped bring judicial standards to the state facilities for the mentally disabled. His suit against the Willowbrook

<sup>2</sup>See Marcia Angell's recent articles in these pages, "Medical Research: The Dangers to the Human Subjects" and "Medical Research on Humans: Making It Ethical," November 19 and December 3, 2015. For additional footnotes, see the Web version of this article at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).

<sup>1</sup>Dominic A. Sisti, Andrea G. Segal, and Ezekiel J. Emanuel, "Improving Long-term Psychiatric Care: Bring Back the Asylum," *JAMA*, Vol. 313, No. 3 (January 20, 2015).



State School, on New York's Staten Island, culminated in a consent decree under which the state agreed to resettle the residents in group homes, with the entire process under court supervision.

The advocacy of organizations like the MHLP, renamed the Bazelon Center (in honor of David Bazelon, a federal judge who vigorously promoted the rights of the mentally ill), also contributed to the adoption of major federal legislation, most notably the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), which articulates the values and practices aimed at expanding the life chances of the physically and mentally handicapped. The bill expresses a strong preference that services and accommodations be provided for the disabled in the community, with minimal restrictions and regular contact with people who are not disabled. As the act notes:

Historically, society has tended to isolate and segregate individuals with disabilities, and, despite some improvements, such forms of discrimination against individuals with disabilities continue to be a serious and pervasive social problem.

The bill also instructs the US attorney general to issue regulations that provide for services in "the most integrated setting appropriate to the needs of qualified individuals with disabilities." The regulations carrying out the act define such a "setting" as one "that enables individuals with disabilities to interact with non-disabled persons to the fullest extent possible."

The leading Supreme Court decision interpreting the ADA requirements

is *Olmstead v. L.C.* (1999). The case involved two women in Georgia, L.C. and E.W., both identified as mentally retarded, or in current usage, "developmentally disabled." L.C. had also been diagnosed with schizophrenia and E.W. with a personality disorder. Both women had been confined at the Georgia Regional Hospital in Atlanta. The psychiatrists treating them had determined that placement in a community-based program would be appropriate for them, but their confinement continued. They then filed suit and asked to be moved to a community care residential program, with the ultimate goal of integration into mainstream society.

Writing for the court majority, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg agreed, asserting that under the ADA,

States are required to provide community-based treatment for persons with mental disabilities when the State's treatment professionals determine that such placement is appropriate, the affected persons do not oppose such treatment, and the placement can be reasonably accommodated, taking into account the resources available to the State and the needs of others with mental disabilities.

As is apparent, this was hardly a radical holding. It did not require that people be released from institutions over the objections of treatment professionals or patients; also, such release was made contingent on the resources available to the state. Justice Ginsburg's opinion pointed out that a lower court had found that community care in local living fa-

cilities is less costly than institutional confinement; but the decision also recognized that, in some cases, a state might face increased costs by funding placements in community facilities before being able to reap the savings involved in closing an institution.

There is no denying that despite the best efforts of lawyers and advocates, dollars and services have not generally followed patients released from institutions into community facilities. The mentally disabled have fared better than the mentally ill, first because parents have been relentless supporters of the rights and needs of their children. They discover the handicap of their child soon after the birth and become ardent advocates for programs and services. Second, Medicaid funding for the mentally disabled—but not for the mentally ill—is increasingly available to encourage release from institutions and the phasing out of the institutions themselves. States can draw on Medicaid matching funds (through the so-called ICF-MR regulations) to support community-based facilities that provide residents with "active treatment."

The outcome for patients released from mental hospitals—or, for that matter, community residents in need of assistance—has not been nearly as favorable. Before the Affordable Care Act (ACA), federal dollars were not available for adults below the age of sixty-five to obtain community mental health services. Moreover, there is no lobby for the mentally ill comparable to the lobbies of parents of the mentally disabled. Mental illness, which often

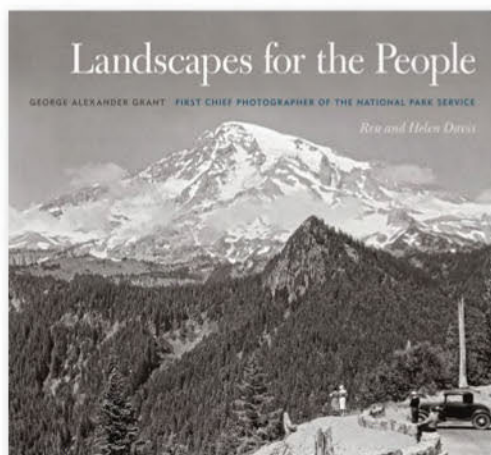
tends to manifest itself in late adolescence or early adulthood, may lead to an estrangement from family. Whatever the reasons, state commissions and investigative reporters provide painful evidence of maltreatment or no treatment at all for the mentally ill.

New York, for example, placed (at a cost of \$40,000 a year) discharged mental patients into so-called adult homes, typically run by for-profit companies; the homes were supposed to provide a safe environment and access to treatment, but they did neither. As Clifford Levy, a journalist for *The New York Times*, reported in a series of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles in 2002, the facilities were typically run-down former hotels or office buildings, three to five floors, with anywhere from fifty to two hundred rooms that residents usually shared. They included a communal kitchen, dining room, and smoking room, described by Levy as a "cluster of worn benches, bare walls, . . . and a floor littered with cigarette butts, spilled coffee, ashes and discarded food." Staff were poorly paid and untrained, incompetent or unwilling to arrange for the psychotherapy that residents wanted and needed.

This persistent failure to deliver decent and effective community care also reflects the shortcomings of state agencies. Again, the New York experience is instructive. It took some twelve years and extensive litigation to get New York to agree to assess the ability and willingness of four thousand residents of adult homes to move into private apartments (so-called supported housing units, which are intended to allow residents to obtain appropriate treatment). But the

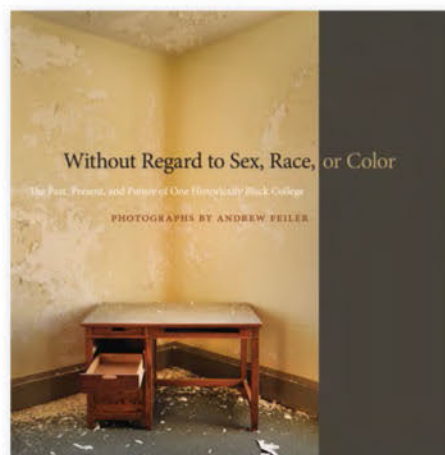
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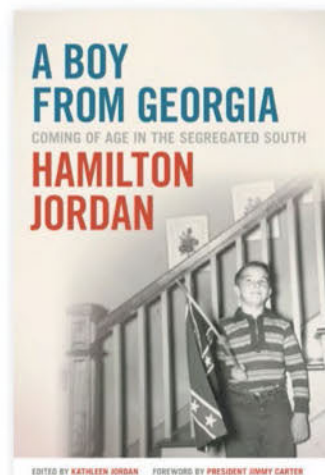
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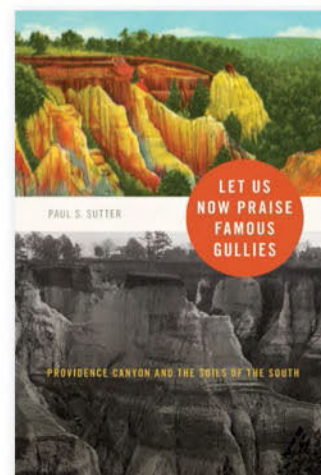
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actual pace of change has been sluggish. The federal judge who demanded and approved the settlement, Nicholas Garaufis, has complained about how slowly necessary changes are being made: in his opinion, delivered in 2014, he wrote, "Relief for these residents is long overdue, and the court considers this delay to be unconscionable."

But even he and the court monitor he appointed, Clarence Sundram, an experienced advocate on behalf of the rights of the mentally disabled and the mentally ill, for all their oversight, have been unable to expedite the process. The reasons for the state's delays are telling. The agreement that 4,197 residents of adult homes would be able to move into private apartments went into effect on July 23, 2013. Between then and March 13, 2015, 1,256 of them were interviewed and 758 wanted to move into private apartments. But the number who actually moved was only forty.

Why so few? Some residents changed their minds about moving, because self-interested staff at adult homes persuaded them or their families that they should stay put. Other residents wanted to move to neighborhoods where housing costs exceeded state budgetary allotments. There were lags in the required assessments of individual cases, which included an updated psychiatric evaluation. There were also difficulties in locating patient records, pervasive staff shortages, and untrained personnel. It was hard to schedule assessments because the people employed by the adult homes were uncooperative, reluctant to complete evaluations that would enable residents to move out. In effect, the state could not get its act together even to fulfill a court order it had accepted.

Finally, all these failures are compounded by the fact that a significant number of former mental patients end up in local jails, often for petty offenses such as disorderly conduct. There they join others who were never committed but also suffer from mental illness. A recent report estimates that nearly 40 percent of the inmates of New York's Rikers Island jail, where the costs of confining them substantially exceeds those of adult homes, have some form of mental illness. Cook County Sheriff Thomas Dart recently commented:

The vast majority of mentally ill people are here for nonviolent crimes, like stealing food to survive or breaking into places, usually looking for somewhere to sleep, or getting caught with drugs because they are self-medicating. How is it different than us locking up diabetics? Jails were never meant to be mental health hospitals.

Still, returning to the days of the asylum would be an egregious mistake. As daunting as it is to assure quality of care in community settings, it is far more difficult to assure that people will be treated decently in closed institutions. To assert, as the authors of the *JAMA* commentary did, that the asylum was "a protected place where safety, sanctuary, and long-term care" was provided and that "it is time to build them—again" is to turn a blind eye to the established facts of asylum life. To give asylums priority over community settings would send the unmistakable message that the disabled are first and foremost a public hazard, best managed

by incarceration. As stingy as legislators may be in providing for facilities in communities—whether in families, adult homes, or private apartments—they are still more stingy in appropriations for sealed-off institutions. Out of sight is out of mind. The likelihood that asylums will be adequately funded and monitored is low, and none of their proponents has suggested policies that might produce a different outcome.

Even more troubling, the advocates of asylums completely fail to take into account the many provisions of the Affordable Care Act that have the potential to transform the care of the mentally ill—both those who have been institutionalized and those who have not. The act defines ten "Essential Health Benefits" that must be part of insurance coverage plans, and they include not only

ACA even has funds for a "Community First Choice" program, giving states the wherewithal to provide low-income people with local services expressly to prevent confinement in institutions.

There is no certainty that states will take advantage of these new incentives and opportunities. Few states have chosen to participate in Community First Choice programs and twenty-two states have refused to expand eligibility for Medicaid programs. So too, insurance companies may find ways to avoid paying for mental health treatment—a charge already being made. Medical homes and accountable care organizations, provided for by the ACA, are just getting underway and those in charge will have much to learn if they are to be effective. But how much better to have new prospects for keeping people at



*'Dance in a Madhouse'; lithograph by George Bellows, 1917*

ambulatory care, emergency care, and hospitalization but also "mental health and substance use disorder services, including behavioral health treatment," that is, community care. In addition, the ACA health insurance exchange provisions give subsidies to low-income people, which will include many of those in need of mental health services. (Some 3.7 million heretofore-uninsured people are estimated to have severe mental illness.) The ACA also requires parity in insurance coverage between physical and mental health services, prohibits discrimination for preexisting medical conditions, and extends coverage for children under parental policies to age twenty-six. All these provisions will expand the insurance available to people in need of mental health services.

Beyond all this, the ACA expands the scope of Medicaid benefits for mental health, providing incentives for health care organizations to combine their services. With substantial federal funding, at least at the outset, providers can establish "medical homes" and "accountable care organizations" to coordinate diagnoses and treatment for both physical and mental health conditions. They would be in a position not only to treat patients but also to assist them in obtaining legal advice, housing, and employment—one-stop shopping for medical and social services. The so-called Medicaid 1915(i) state waiver option expands states' abilities to provide benefits at home and in community clinics to specific groups of people, including the severely mentally ill. The

home and in their communities than to issue tired calls for more asylums.

Finally, a commitment to realize the principles of the ADA may be reinforced by current developments in criminal justice. Both liberals and conservatives are recognizing that the US is incarcerating far too many people for too long at enormous financial cost. The US prison population has increased fivefold since the 1970s. This is partly the result of over-incarceration of nonviolent and low-level drug offenders, and of sentences that are many times longer than they are in European countries. It is also the result of three-strike laws, and the virtual elimination of parole.

President Obama has recently made reducing prison populations a political priority, and even the Koch brothers have joined with such philanthropists as George Soros in support of such efforts. Congressional approval might be forthcoming. States that have declined to take federal funds for Medicaid expansion may recognize that their own expenditures on correctional institutions will remain high unless they find ways to reduce the number of mentally ill in jails and prisons. The community services that Medicaid helps to support would go a long way to accomplishing this goal. The policies that would emerge—such as expanded programs to integrate offenders back into the community—could also prove highly beneficial for the disabled. In the end, it is in everyone's interest—offenders, disabled, and the general public—to have fewer people under lock and key. □



# Updike's Violin

Jonathan Galassi

## Selected Poems

by John Updike,  
edited by Christopher Carduff,  
with an introduction by Brad Leithauser.  
Knopf, 287 pp., \$30.00

John Updike's first published book was a collection of poems. *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures*, primarily a collection of light verse, was published by Cass Canfield at Harper and Brothers in 1958, when the author was twenty-six. (Harper rejected a novel manuscript, *Home*, at more or less the same time.) In college Updike had "effortlessly" written light verse for *The Harvard Lampoon*, according to his classmate Michael Arlen, and had begun publishing poems, "mostly delicious froth, ingenious, well-crafted silliness," his biographer Adam Begley calls them,\* in *The New Yorker*, the magazine that had been for Updike "the object of my fantasies and aspirations since I was thirteen." Soon he was invited to be a staff writer at the magazine, which was then coming into its own as the nation's premier weekly, but he abruptly left New York in 1957 for the comparative tranquillity of the North Shore of Massachusetts, where he was to live for the rest of his life, producing scores of books—novels, stories, criticism—among them eight volumes of poems.

From the start, Updike was a writer of prodigious fluidity and application who almost immediately found "frictionless success" where he most desired it, and his ambition had a popular tinge in keeping with his targeted venue. You could almost call his early verse "applied poetry," entertainments written with his left hand, as it were. As time went by, though, he distinguished his light verse from what he later called his "secret bliss." "My poems are my oeuvre's beloved waifs," he wrote in the preface to his 1993 *Collected Poems*. Lurking in the shadows of Updike's will to shine is another, more surreptitious aspiration, one he never fully came to terms with.

"Description expresses love," he once wrote, and "the telling use of minute, convincing detail" is the substrate of his fictional art. Updike's prose, especially early on, is often hypnotically propulsive. It drives the reader forward with a vigor enriched by sonic patterns, layered, elaborately balanced metaphoric structures, and a ceaseless flowing-ebbing-flowing rhythmic force. William Maxwell, Updike's adoring *New Yorker* editor, felt that his 1958 story "The Alligators" "read like one long poem," and the brooding rush of his fiction, most notably in the great early books *Rabbit*, *Run* (1960) and *The Centaur* (1963), is his most intensely lyrical writing.

As a close-to-random example, here's the opening of *Rabbit Redux* (1971):

Men emerge pale from the little  
printing plant at four sharp, ghosts  
for an instant, blinking, until the  
outdoor light overcomes the look



John Updike, Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, 1985; photograph by Dominique Nabokov

of constant indoor light clinging to them. In winter, Pine Street at this hour is dark, darkness presses down early from the mountain that hangs above the stagnant city of Brewer; but now in summer the granite curbs starred with mica and the row houses differentiated by speckled bastard sidings and the hopeful small porches with their jigsaw brackets and gray milk-bottle boxes and the sooty ginkgo trees and the baking curbside cars wince beneath a brilliance like a frozen explosion.

The piling on of exquisitely observed detail ("and...and...and... and...and..."); the elegantly varied repetitions ("outdoor light"/"indoor light"; "dark"/"darkness"); the pathetic fallacy of the late verb "wince," which echoes and focuses the men's "blinking" as they emerge from the printing plant into the blinding afternoon sun—these are seductive, dazzling, inherently poetic effects.

Opposed to this gift for close observation, or mimetic evocation, was another, more deflated style he called "abstract-personal," introspective rather than exuberant, which turns out to be the primary mode of Updike's "serious" poetry. Where his best fiction is expansive, suggestive, impelled by metaphor, his poems are often pinched,

withholding, scientifically dry. Updike in his poems often seems to be regarding things as if they were under a microscope. As in his prose, his subject is always his perceptions, but in his poems he doesn't jab his fingers into the pie. Often, they read like jottings out of a notebook—things taken in but not yet really put to use.

Take the opening of "Mobile of Birds," from 1958:

*There is something  
in their planetary weave that is  
comforting.*

*The polycentric orbits, elliptical  
with mutual motion,  
random as nature, and yet,  
above all,  
calculable, recall  
those old Ptolemaic heavens small  
enough for the Byzantine trinity,  
Plato's Ideals,  
formal devotion,  
seven levels of bliss, and number-  
less wheels  
of omen, balanced occultly.*

All that makes this verse and not prose is the fact that it's cut into lines, some of which have been made to rhyme unimaginatively. It's debatable whether Updike the novelist would have allowed these unconcise, unrhythmic lines into his prose.

Updike's poetry writing falls into three phases. In his first decade or so as a writer, the poems can be clunkily rhetorical, monotone, lacking in the happy variety that animates his fiction. There are repetitive, plodding iambs with forced enjambments: the poems sacrifice rhythmic tautness to prosy description, as above. Occasionally he can get off a great line like "Animals seem so sad to be themselves—," the incipit of "Topsfield Fair," but this is followed by disappointing banalities ("the turkey a turkey even to his wattle,/the rabbit with his pink, distinctly, eyes"). In his poems Updike resorts archly to archaisms like "anent," "yclept," "saith," "leathern," "nether halls," "a truth long known," "Chinamen." Luggage "stands in wait of its unpacking." The poems are studded with expectable adjectives, outmoded inversions, bad or forced rhymes—or no rhymes when rhymes would help.

There are flashes of poetry, but they fight for air. Here is the last stanza of "Hoeing" (1963):

*How neatly the green weeds go  
under!  
The blade chops the earth new.  
Ignorant the wise boy who  
has never rendered thus the  
world fecunder.*

The first line here is sharply, wittily observant. The second, though, is clotted, close to unsayable. In the third and fourth lines he tries awkwardly for sentimentousness (note the forced off-rhythmic rhyme of "new" and "who," which seems to exist only because it can, and that unfortunate "thus"). The final rhyme, though, is genius: entirely unexpected, insolent, unforgettable.

In Updike's second, middle phase he discovers what Brad Leithauser in his introduction to *Selected Poems* refers to as "the form he found most congenial...the unrhymed, loosely iambic sonnet." The poems become less jagged, more comfortable in their skin, though this period begins with the writer's one foray into modernist experimentation, the book-long autobiographical poem *Midpoint* (1969). It includes photographs, potted scientific summaries, and headlines like "MIRRORS ARE VAGINAS," "PENISES ARE EYES," and this writer's favorite, "dance, words!"

One of his themes here is gratitude for his good fortune, his sense of being preternaturally gifted, of how "I warmed/to my onliness." Updike's presumption that everything he has to say about himself is de facto interesting is refreshing in its candor. He presents himself here, as he says elsewhere, as "a literary Mr. Sunshine," but it's not a sympathetic persona, or an endlessly renewable poetic stance:

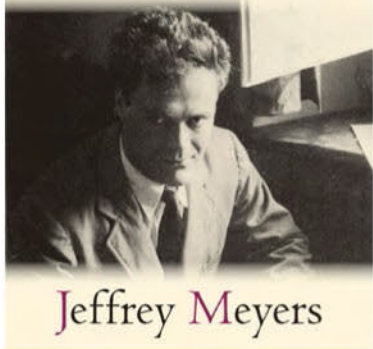
*For conscientious climbing,  
God gave me these rewards:  
fame with its bucket of  
unanswerable letters,  
wealth with its worrisome market  
report...  
and quatre enfants—none of them  
bed-wetters.*

*Midpoint* concludes with several

\*Updike (Harper, 2014), p. 139. See Hermione Lee's review in these pages, May 8, 2014.



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1922–2015

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pages of bravura, occasionally regrettable, Popeian acrobatics—

*Six million Jews will join  
the Congolese  
King Leopold of Belgium  
cleared like trees*

or

*Foretastes of death, the aftertaste  
of sin,  
In Winter, Whiskey, and in  
Summer, Gin.*

All in all the poem comes off as a miasmatic indulgence. The self-congratulatory approach continues in "Apologies to Harvard," his 1973 Phi Beta Kappa poem, in which he looks back, with a healthy degree of complicity, on the institution that "spit me out, by God, a gentleman," though he does acknowledge about his peers that "*We did not know we were a generation.*"

The reader has to admire Updike's self-knowledge and the pitiless dissection to which he subjects himself along with everyone and everything else. Not for nothing did he call his memoirs *Self-consciousness* (1989). He sees and reports on the worst in himself, and it doesn't bother him all that much. "The artist who works in words and anecdotes, images and facts, wants to share with us nothing less than his digested life," he wrote, and Begley in his biography goes to great and artful lengths to show how closely Updike's fiction hews to his own experience. As he himself put it, "nothing in fiction rings quite as true as truth, slightly rearranged." He was a razor-sharp spy on his surroundings, his friends and wives and lovers, "scrutinizing them with merciless sociological precision," at times to their discomfort and/or outrage. The poem "Marching Through a Novel" reveals the essential coldness of the writerly gaze: "I do what I can for them, / but it is not enough.... Believe me, I love them/though I march them to finish them off."

He does it to himself, too. In a story from the mid-1950s his alter ego is already "lustful, somewhat spoiled, a touch self-satisfied." In the poems, though, the slight arrangement of fiction is eliminated. Updike's characters, and especially himself, appear without protective screening. "I drank up women's tears and spit them out/as 10-point Janson, Roman and *ital*," he writes, one can't quite say how ruefully, in one of his final poems.

In Updike's last period, which more or less starts in the 1990s, and is the most interesting to me, he deals with decay and mortality and the "nullity" at the core of his view of life with the same steely mordancy that has served him as a fiction writer, but with a new awareness of loss. "Is there anything to write about but human sadness?" asks the man who not so very long before was consumed by the "rage/to excel, to exceed, to climb still higher." In one of his later gems, "Perfection Wasted," he muses on the impending dissolution of the artist's intricately fashioned imitation of personhood:

*And another regrettable thing  
about death  
is the ceasing of your own brand  
of magic,*

*which took a whole life to develop  
and market—  
the quips, the witticisms, the slant  
adjusted to a few, those loved ones  
nearest  
the lip of the stage, their soft faces  
blanched  
in the footlight glow, their  
laughter close to tears,  
their tears confused with their  
diamond earrings,  
their warm pooled breath in and  
out with your heartbeat,  
their response and your  
performance twinned.  
The jokes over the phone. The  
memories packed  
in the rapid-access file. The whole  
act.  
Who will do it again? That's it:  
no one;  
imitators and descendants aren't  
the same.*

Often, the reader is granted intimate, almost self-disgusted access to the author's solitude and self-absorption as he chronicles his own decay. In "One Tough Keratosis," he describes the progress of a skin cancer on his hand. And in "To a Dead Flame," he writes about "The aging smell... a rank small breeze wafts upward/when I shed my underwear." "You never met my jealous present wife," he tells his long-departed lover: "she hates this poem."

Some of the poems versify digested information as before, though not always accurately. The French sculptor Clodion, for example, was not "*dit* Claude Michel," but vice versa. And in "Munich" Updike asserts that "the bombs fell lightly here," though the city endured more than seventy Allied raids. And then there is this:

### THE BEAUTIFUL BOWEL MOVEMENT

*Though most of them aren't much  
to write about—  
mere squibs and nubs, like half-  
smoked pale cigars,  
the tint and stink recalling  
Tuesday's meal,  
the texture loose and soon  
dissolved—this one,  
struck off in solitude one  
afternoon  
(that prairie stretch before the  
late light fails)  
with no distinct sensation, sweet  
or pained,  
of special inspiration or release,  
was yet a masterpiece: a flawless  
coil,  
unbroken, in the bowl, as if a  
potter  
who worked in this most frail,  
least grateful clay  
had set himself to shape a  
topaz vase.  
O spiral perfection, not seashell  
nor  
stardust, how can I keep you?  
With this poem.*

In his later years Updike is still making cow patties for his long-dead mother and remains well pleased with their shapeliness.

Christopher Carduff's selection closes with "Endpoint," a series of unrhymed sonnets that recall Robert Lowell's work of the late 1960s and 1970s, and look back with a jaundiced eye on the

triumphalism of *Midpoint*, written nearly forty years earlier. Updike's last, best book of poems records his sudden contraction of lung cancer in his seventy-seventh year with a chilling and dispassionate honesty, and with flashes of true lyricism: "I was male, and made/to make a mark, while Mother typed birdsong," he writes of his often-conflicted relationship with his writer mother, Linda Grace Hoyer. "Perhaps/we meet our heaven at the start and not/the end of life." "I was lighter then, and lived as if/within forever." "My unseemly haste/of greedy living," he calls it. The last poem was written barely a month before his death in January 2009.

It's interesting to consider the figures who dominated American poetry in Updike's youth. William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, and Robert Frost were still alive, if not in their prime—not to mention the immortal Ogden Nash. Wallace Stevens had only recently died. The confessional poets, the New York School, the poets of the West Coast—Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Kenneth Rexroth—were all at work or about to emerge, to mention only a few of the most significant. Updike occasionally sounds a bit like Frost and parodies Eliot—"this is Connecticut, and April," he writes in "Three Poems from Airplanes," mocking the famous formulation in "Little Gidding" that "history is now and England." He seems uneasy with the bardic stance or with finding another language in which to express his poetic ideas, arguably because his ideas are not poetic. He sees, he denotes, but he does not transform. His observations nearly always remain the beginning and the end of his writing in verse.

Updike's favorite peer in the craft was L.E. Sissman, a Boston advertising man who wrote unfashionable yet incisive narrative verse about upper-middle-class lives that, as Updike himself wrote, "though possessing the declarative virtues of prose... is always poetic." In fact, Sissman's work, with its assured, melodic rhyming, was far superior in naturalness and control to Updike's—lyrical, as Updike recognized, in ways he was not. Another gifted local poetic apostate, X.J. Kennedy, reviewing the *Collected Poems*, compared Updike's best work to Larkin's, though it's hard to find any true affinities beyond a certain dyspepsia between the great English balladeer of postwar disaffection and the largely complacent character of the American Middle. Tom Disch in *Poetry* called Updike "one of the best poets writing in America," but these were distinctly minority opinions. Basically, Updike's secret bliss—like most poets' work, for that matter—stayed secret.

One comes away feeling that less is finally more when it comes to verse like Updike's. On balance, a *Selected Poems* as generous as this one feels like too much of not all that good a thing. Updike is always an aesthete, and his organizing eye can get him in trouble, as it did in his curiously detached reaction in *The New Yorker* to the catastrophe of September 11, which he observed firsthand: "We keep fighting not to reduce it to our own smallness," he wrote. What's missing from the poems is, essentially, lift. They stay earthbound on the page, locked in their abstract-personal selves. They don't rise to meet us, and after a while we get tired of trying to meet them. □



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Leo Carey

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## Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas

by Seth Monahan. Oxford University Press, 278 pp., \$45.00

In May 1911, Gustav Mahler, the most famous conductor in the world and an important but controversial composer, was dying of a bacterial infection of the heart. As he passed in and out of consciousness, he was heard to murmur “Mozartl”—an affectionate diminutive of the composer’s name—and “Who’ll take care of Schoenberg now?”

The words encapsulate Mahler’s Janus-like position, perched at the turn of the last century. His essential sound is unmistakably nineteenth-century and places him at the end of the great line of Viennese symphonists—Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Bruckner. At the same time, his sensibility and his determination to push the symphonic form to its breaking point make him a kind of proto-modernist. The seminal atonal works of the following Viennese generation—Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern—sound nothing like Mahler’s, but these composers worshiped him and were deeply influenced by his example. He in turn worked hard to encourage them, in Schoenberg’s case providing significant financial assistance.

Still, in the decades after his death, Mahler’s music was overshadowed by the flourishing of modernism as well as by his much-longer-lived contemporary Richard Strauss. The story of Mahler’s neglect and rediscovery has become an unavoidable part of any discussion of his work. The symphonies were dismissed as *Kapellmeistermusik*, the kind of music that conductors often produce—deftly orchestrated but lacking a voice of its own. It didn’t help that Mahler was Jewish; an anti-Semitic strain in criticism of his work was already well established in his lifetime and under the Nazis his work became unperformable in Germany and Austria.

But around 1960, things started to change. Conductors championed him, notably Leonard Bernstein, and the advent of the LP record enabled listeners to assimilate these gargantuan pieces through repeated listening. Then, too, in the postwar era, the music came to speak for a vanished Europe. Theodor Adorno even claimed that it was possible to hear that “the Jew Mahler scented Fascism decades ahead.” Adorno’s monograph on Mahler, published in 1960, was vastly influential. Before it, critics could be divided into those who saw Mahler as squarely carrying on the symphonic tradition and those who found his music blemished by trite material, overblown handling, and a neurotic vacillation between irony and sentimentality. Adorno, ingeniously,

played the two views off against each other. He claimed that Mahler was subverting tradition from the inside, deliberately showing up the limitations of the materials and procedures he had inherited. Mahler, like a good Marxist, was heightening the contradictions. (Mahler did in fact harbor lifelong sympathy for socialism but was not politically active.)

After Adorno’s essay, Mahler’s overreaching maximalism and his fondness for banal melodies stopped being an embarrassment and became instead his core achievement. He emerged as a far more sophisticated artist: the works, tuneful enough to please the average concertgoer, were now also difficult and ambiguous enough to absorb the cognoscenti.

Mahler advocates before Adorno had to adopt a proselytizing tone. A recently republished volume contains two works of this kind: a reverent appreciation from 1936 by the conductor Bruno Walter, an acolyte of Mahler’s, who premiered the symphonic song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony after his death; and an essay from 1941 by the composer Ernst Křenek. Křenek was briefly married to Mahler’s daughter Anna, and worked on completing two movements from Mahler’s Tenth Symphony, left unfinished at his death. His essay is brilliantly perceptive and anticipates Adorno. Mahler’s symphonic edifices are old-fashioned, he writes, but “the cracks in the structure herald the future.”



Gustav Mahler, drawn by William Kentridge as Count Casti-Piani for his production of Alban Berg’s opera *Lulu*, 2013. It is on view in Kentridge’s exhibition ‘Drawings for Lulu,’ at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York City, until December 19, and collected in his limited-edition book *The Lulu Plays*, just published by Arion Press.

Today Mahler is no longer a cause and critics must seek out unexplored aspects of a composer who has become a fixture of the musical landscape. Two recent academic studies, by Thomas Peattie and Seth Monahan, are complementary opposites: Peattie focuses on evocative moments of orchestral writing, Monahan on the long-range narratives created by Mahler’s use of sonata form.

Among composers, Mahler was never fully eclipsed: Britten’s Spring Symphony and Shostakovich’s Fourteenth Symphony show an obvious debt to the way he grafted the cantata and the song cycle onto the symphony. And his example was particularly important to composers of the postwar avant-garde. Karlheinz Stockhausen, in a preface to the first volume of Henry-Louis de la Grange’s mammoth Mahler biography in 1973, expressed the mystical view that “should a higher being from a distant star wish to investigate the nature of earthlings in a most concentrated moment, he could not afford to bypass Mahler’s music.” The famous third movement of Luciano Berio’s “Sinfonia” (1968–1969) takes the entire scherzo of Mahler’s Second Symphony and fills it with a cacophonous array of spoken text and musical quotations from Bach to Boulez. The collage-like homage is apt, because Mahler’s works are themselves so compulsively capacious. “The symphony must be like the world,” Mahler told Sibelius in 1907. “It must be all-embracing.”

William Kentridge

Contemplating the popularity of Richard Strauss in 1902, Mahler wrote, “My time will come.” Because he was right in the long run the words now sound quietly confident, but at the time his self-belief was compromised by doubt and by frustration with the course his career had taken. His outlook was closer to that of the imagined protagonist of his First Symphony who, he said, “as often as he lifts his head above the billows of life, is again and again dealt a blow by fate and sinks down anew.” Mahler’s anxiety about his reputation and legacy is written into the music, which—in its extremes of emotion, volume, and sheer duration—is determined to assert itself in spite of everything.

Born in 1860, Mahler grew up about halfway between Prague and Brno, in what was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father was a distiller and innkeeper, and Mahler grew up loving the sound of village bands and other popular music. His talent was recognized early. At four, he could play on the accordion folk songs he heard Czech servants singing. At six he composed a polka that had a funeral march as an introduction, a foretaste of incongruities to come. Synagogue chants and other Jewish music quite probably left a mark too, though specific influences are elusive. Adorno argued that “what is Jewish in Mahler does not participate directly in the folk element, but speaks through all its mediation as an intellectual voice”—a sense of instability and otherness permeating the work.

At fifteen, Mahler went to Vienna, entering the conservatory—his teachers included Bruckner—and taking an eclectic variety of courses at the university. Like just about every other young man of the era, he read Schopenhauer, became obsessed with Wagner, and thought he might become a poet. His friends included the composer Hugo Wolf but the pair fell out over an opera they both wanted to write. Another friend was Hans Rott, a composer who is one of the great what-ifs of music history. He died insane at twenty-six—he had tuberculosis and probably syphilis—leaving a single remarkably Mahlerian symphony that predates all of Mahler’s and that contains several themes that later appeared in Mahler’s Second Symphony.

As a student, Mahler was known mostly as a song composer. Friends called him “another Schubert.” But his ambitions went beyond small forms and he looked for ways to turn this talent to greater account. It’s no accident that songs provide fodder for his first four symphonies—that is, for the first two decades of his composing career. The First Symphony is largely built around the early song cycle *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer), and songs constitute entire movements of the next three symphonies.

Given Mahler’s interest in narrative and in vocal writing, it’s surprising that he never attempted an opera—the more so since opera became the focus of his conducting career. In his



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mid-thirties, with three symphonies written, he told a friend that "we are now standing—I am sure of it—at the great crossroads that will soon separate forever the two diverging paths of symphonic and dramatic music." His ambition, he explained, was to enrich symphonies with the innovations of Wagner, just as Wagner had enriched opera with "the means of expression of symphonic music."

But this is a retrospective rationalization, and the early years reveal him struggling to decide what combination of the vocal and symphonic would suit him best. In its astounding intensity the third song of *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen* is effectively a Wagner opera condensed into three short minutes. Parts of the first two symphonies were performed as tone poems and, before them, his first piece of note was a dramatic cantata, *Das Klagende Lied* (Song of Lamentation), completed when he was twenty. The cantata, a revenge story with a fairy-tale setting, is full of undigested influences but extremely impressive. Mahler's voice is already completely distinctive—with pulverizing climaxes, passages of otherworldly softness, and dizzying contrasts of earnestness and kitsch.

Pleased with *Das Klagende Lied*, Mahler entered it for a prestigious award presented by Vienna's leading music association. The jury was conservative—Brahms was a member—and the piece didn't win. Mahler took the setback better than Rott had done in the same circumstances a year before; Rott had been committed to an asylum after brandishing a gun on a train and saying that Brahms had packed the carriages with dynamite. Still, Mahler was deeply marked by the failure and later claimed that, had he won, "my whole life would have taken a different turn." Winning, he believed, might have let him devote himself exclusively to composing instead of to conducting. This isn't strictly true. Mahler had embarked on his conducting path before the great disappointment; after years as an impoverished student, he knew he had to earn a living. But the sense of a missed opportunity haunted him.

Mahler began his conducting career in a series of provincial opera houses. The musicians were so bad that he preferred to conduct music he disliked, rather than defile masterworks. But his perfectionism got results and he quickly progressed to larger cities—Kassel, Prague, Leipzig, Budapest, and Hamburg. His ambition was the directorship of the Vienna State Opera, the most important musical post in Europe. He eventually got this job in 1897 and stayed for a decade amid ever-escalating political and administrative squabbles. (Taking up the post required baptism, which doesn't particularly seem to have bothered him.)

Mahler was known for his physical conducting style and unerring theat-

rical sense. Count Albert Apponyi, a crucial ally at the Budapest Opera who had been a friend of Liszt, noted, "His eye ranges over the whole production, the decor, the machinery, the lighting." Bruno Walter recalls that Mahler never "hesitated...to subordinate the musical to the dramatic point of view." He was also a forceful administrator, just as likely to upbraid an usher who let in latecomers as a singer who disobeyed his directions. Small but very strong, he was a completely commanding figure. Walter writes that he had never dreamed that a mere word or gesture "could frighten and alarm others and force them into blind obedience." The composer and suffragette Ethel Smyth recalled that dealing with Mahler



Gustav Mahler in the foyer of the Vienna State Opera, 1907

was "like handling a bomb cased in razor-edges."

Mahler's schedule in these years was punishing—260 performances in two seasons in Kassel—and his determination to keep progressing as a composer required superhuman exertion. In 1895, he prepared the premiere of his Second Symphony with the Berlin Philharmonic while maintaining his day job at the Hamburg opera. Each evening, after the curtain fell in Hamburg, he would board a night train to Berlin. There he would direct a morning rehearsal of the symphony, lay down his baton, and get the train back to Hamburg for that evening's performance. Composing his own work had to be squeezed into tiny gaps in his daunting schedule. From 1893 he established a pattern of a month's summer vacation in a series of mountain and lake-side retreats—Steinbach am Attersee, Maiernigg, Toblach—which he would spend locked away in a little cabin sketching the next work at high speed. The rest of the year was left for working out orchestration and other details. He called himself *der Sommerkomponist*—the summer composer.

Biographical readings of Mahler's music are popular and probably justi-

fied. Most of these relate to his later years: his marriage to Alma in 1902; the birth of their children and the death of their first-born daughter; Alma's affair with the architect Walter Gropius; the diagnosis of a life-threatening heart condition. Thus we have the famous hammer blows in the last movement of the Sixth Symphony, which, according to the always unreliable Alma, show him felled "as a tree is felled." Thus the halting rhythm at the start of the Ninth Symphony that Leonard Bernstein—persuasively but on no basis at all—said recorded the irregular beats of Mahler's weakened heart. But although Mahler clearly sought to cram his life into his music, the vicissitudes of his later years merely provided him with material and deepened his perspective. They didn't form his aims and technique as a composer in the way that earlier, less melodramatic struggles did.

Mahler, above all, is music's first true workaholic. Earlier composers may have worked just as hard, but—Bach's *Kapellmeister* duties notwithstanding—they chiefly worked at composition. Mahler, however, had a job. It kept him from the work he felt he should really be doing but he made no effort to quit. (Leaving the Vienna opera, in 1907, heralded a more relaxed schedule, but he soon found a way to overexert himself in the next phase of his career, in New York.) Křenek shrewdly writes, "It is quite obvious that Mahler immensely enjoyed his theatrical work no matter how often he claimed to loath it" and that "he needed ever renewed proof of the limitations of this world in order to retain the feeling of terrific tension which is so characteristic of his music."

At times, Mahler told himself something similar. "In art as in life I am at the mercy of spontaneity," he wrote. "If I had to compose, not a note would come." While he might not be able to produce as much as "the current matadors of the concert hall" (he surely meant Strauss), a man with so little time had one advantage: "His inner experience concentrates in *one* work." He might have added that, though his conducting career limited productivity, the scale of his symphonies was the natural counterpart of his careerist will to power.

Mahler sometimes longed for a completely different existence. "There are times when I am disheartened and feel like giving up music completely, thinking of ultimate happiness as an obscure and tranquil existence in some quiet corner of this earth," he wrote. "How free and happy man becomes as soon as he leaves the unnatural restless bustle of city life and returns to the tranquility of nature." The joy that he experienced in rural surroundings, especially on solitary hikes during his summer retreats, is manifest in his music from the very beginning of the First Symphony,



with its clarinet cuckoo calls and quotation of a song about walking across dewy fields in the morning.

But one of the most arresting points in Thomas Peattie's new study is that even Mahler's bucolic idylls were conditioned by his busy life. The resorts where he went were fashionable and increasingly crowded. Good rail connections linked them to the major centers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, making them "microcosms of the very cities from which the composer so often claimed to take refuge." The experience was more like Davos than Caspar David Friedrich. Mahler's love of nature was predicated on his separation from it.

There's a history to this situation. The first movement of Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony bears the heading "Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the countryside": evidently the implied protagonist is an urban creature. But the contradictions are particularly acute in Mahler's case. Peattie quotes letters that he wrote to Alma as he admired picturesque landscapes on trains: "What a shame that one can't get out and wander outside."

Once you start looking, almost nothing in Mahler's scenic writing is quite what it seems. A good example is the inclusion of cowbells in the Sixth Symphony. When Strauss uses cowbells, in his *Alpensinfonie*, there is no mystery: Alps, ergo cowbells. But Mahler's Sixth, known as the "Tragic," isn't really alpine; it's one of his most classical and least pictorial works. The sense of something alpine materializes only briefly and is then subsumed into other, unconnected impressions. The oddness

of this was not lost on contemporary reviewers. "How should these offstage cowbells be taken in music that is neither programmatic nor operatic?" asked one. Another joked, "The many cows in this 'tragic' symphony have been the cause of particular amusement."

The cowbells are typical of the way Mahler uses effects that hint at meanings but whose significance remains unfixed. Peattie emphasizes Mahler's frequent use of offstage instruments. This had almost no precedent in symphonic music, though it was a commonplace in opera—an approaching military band in *Così fan Tutte*, receding hunting horns in *Tristan und Isolde*, and so on. Mahler used the effect right at the start of his First Symphony, in a sequence of offstage trumpet calls; these come first from two trumpets placed, according to the score, "at a very great distance away," then from a third placed merely "in the distance." The moment recalls the offstage trumpet in *Fidelio* that tells us help is approaching for the unjustly imprisoned hero Florestan. But in Mahler's symphony there is no clear narrative logic. Why is one trumpet closer than the other two, and what are these instruments doing offstage in the first place?

Peattie thinks we should hear such effects not programmatically but "as sonic events in their own right." Seen this way, the episodes foreshadow the more extreme spatial experiments of later composers, such as the three separate orchestras of Stockhausen's *Gruppen* (a piece that, as it happens, was written during a very Mahlerian alpine retreat). But Mahler's sound

worlds are not purely abstract. They carry connotations that are clear often to the point of cliché: there are horn calls, gay waltzes, funeral marches. Křenek writes that Mahler, by creating assemblages of music ripe with associations, "anticipates the basic principle of surrealism to an amazing extent." Adorno, more famously, saw Mahler as music's answer to the realist novel: "Pedestrian the musical material, sublime the execution."

Mahler's juxtaposition of disparate sound worlds made him a master of heightened, transfixing moments—the guitar-and-mandolin serenade in the Seventh Symphony; the colossal brass fanfare that tears apart the first movement of the First; the posthorn solo in the Third that seems to reach us from the other side of a valley. The inevitable problem, though, was how to make heterogeneous worlds speak with concerted, cumulative force. Seth Monahan's new study argues that Mahler does so by engaging with classical structures—in contrast to the many critics who assume that he saw them either as mere conveniences or else as archaisms to be subverted. Monahan's formal analyses, though necessarily very technical, are persuasive, but it's worth noting that one of Mahler's most radical innovations in the establishment of long-range unity was surprisingly simple: putting the slow movement last.

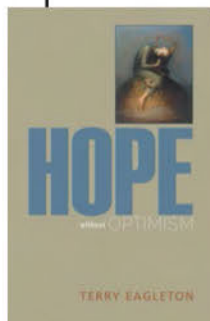
It's a solution he approached in the choral finale of the Second Symphony but which achieved full expression in the Third. This symphony was his longest and the most various; he envisaged

it as encompassing "the world, nature in its entirety." Perhaps for this reason, it was the one that he had most trouble bringing to its final shape. He spent years playing with several versions, first with seven movements then with six, during which process the slow movement gradually slid from a conventional position in the middle of the work to the end.

There was almost no precedent for this (Tchaikovsky's near-contemporaneous "Pathétique" is the one great exception) and Mahler evinced surprise at where he'd ended up, writing that he had done it "without at the moment knowing why, and contrary to custom." He later reused the idea of a slow finale to stunning effect in *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony and he seems to have been planning something similar for the unfinished Tenth.

In a sense, Mahler's symphonies are questions about coherence—about how much experience a piece of music can contain before it bursts apart. The finale of the Third is a slow D-major chorale that seems to take stock of the five disparate movements that have gone before. It proves to be an inexhaustible font of melody and counterpoint, never exactly repeating itself and always disclosing new inner parts and descants. "In the Adagio everything is resolved in the calm of existence," Mahler wrote. The culmination of the symphony comes not with an active climax, as in the classical symphony, but in the discovery of a new mode, passive and contemplative. The discovery of this mode, a triumph of instinct over technique, is the key to Mahler's nature as a composer. □

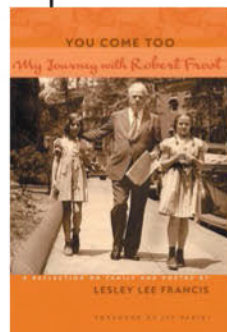
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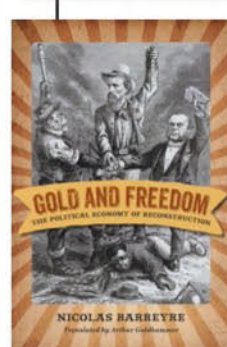
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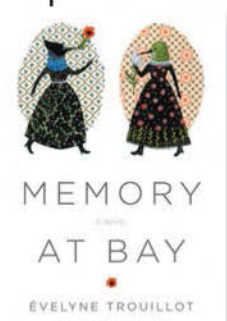
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# The Charms of George Armstrong Custer

Thomas Powers

## Custer's Trials: A Life on the Frontier of a New America

by T. J. Stiles.

Knopf, 582 pp., \$30.00

The nineteenth-century cavalry officer George Armstrong Custer, who was a general at twenty-three and dead at thirty-six, has probably been the subject of more books than any other American, Lincoln excepted. All until now move swiftly through the brilliant feats of arms of the Civil War career that made Custer a national hero to focus instead on his last hours. Every schoolboy used to know that Custer died in 1876 on a hill overlooking the Little Bighorn River in Montana with five companies of the 7th Cavalry dead to a man around him, killed by Sioux and Cheyenne Indians. Only a single cavalry horse was found alive on the field.

Custer was the commander so the failure was his, the result of overconfidence and wrong decisions. He had divided his regiment into four groups before sending them into battle, exposing each to defeat in turn. He issued a promise to support the detachment of his second-in-command, Major Marcus Reno, with "the whole outfit," but failed to give it any support at all. He did not know where the village was that he was planning to attack, or how big it was. He did not know how to reach the village from the bluffs that lined the eastern bank of the river. He believed in error that the Indians were poised to run, not stand and fight. Custer's own detachment never crossed or even reached the river, much less the village on the other side. In fact, he never actually attacked the Indians at all. They rode out instead to meet him, sent his soldiers reeling back, pursued them up the spine of a long hill, and finally overwhelmed the desperate remnant in about the time, a Cheyenne war leader said later, that it takes a hungry man to eat his lunch.

When news of the disaster spread by telegraph in early July during a national celebration of the Centennial in Philadelphia, the country could hardly believe it. A century of excuse-making promptly began. Two popular images cast the disaster in a heroic light—a chromolithograph commissioned by Anheuser-Busch that hung over bars throughout the land, and a movie still of Errol Flynn playing Custer in the final scene of *They Died with Their Boots On*. Both depict Custer as the last man standing, wearing a buckskin jacket, hatless, sword in hand, and surrounded by stacks of dead savages.

The reality, long denied, was very different. In the fighting at the Little Bighorn about 261 soldiers and civilians were killed, including four members of Custer's own family—two brothers, a brother-in-law, and a nephew. The number of Sioux and Cheyenne killed in the fight was far fewer, on the order of thirty to forty, according to an authoritative study of Indian accounts by the historian Richard Hardorff in his book *Hokahey! A Good Day to Die* (1999). The disparity, typical of a rout, helps to explain what happened. Custer had lost control of the fight.

His men were in disarray, incapable of organized defense, overwhelmed in small groups, the bodies of officers and men scattered along their route of flight "like corn," according to an officer who explored the scene a day or two later. Custer himself was found dead on the hill, shot in the side and in the left temple. The last of his men had been killed as they ran in panic down toward the river, probably hoping to hide in the brush and undergrowth along the bank.

That is roughly the way I think things unfolded, but it is only fair to say that

most books about Custer really get underway.

Leaving the Little Bighorn out of *Custer's Trials* is about the boldest purely literary decision I've seen in a long while, and the effect is startling. We are given a cursory sketch of the disaster in the twenty-page epilogue that concludes the book, but it would be stretching things even to call it a bare outline. Faintly visible within the epilogue are one or two hints, no more, of where Stiles thinks that things went wrong and who ought to be held accountable. His stony refusal to wrestle with the main event seems willful and



George Armstrong Custer, right, with his captured West Point classmate Confederate Lieutenant James B. Washington and an escaped slave after the Battle of Fair Oaks, or Seven Pines, Virginia, May 31–June 1, 1862

James F. Gibson/Library of Congress

one foot on solid ground and one over the abyss. He ignored rules. He racked up demerits at West Point but always squeaked by. In his final year Custer and some thirty other cadets flunked a crucial exam, and all were dismissed. Only Custer was reinstated. Why? He chalked it up to "Custer luck," and it's not a bad explanation. On some people—Winston Churchill, for example, who skirted death a score of times—Providence shines. Custer's luck saved him again when he was court-martialed for permitting one cadet to strike another. That was unforgivable, unless you were Custer. The court only reprimanded him and he was allowed to graduate, last in his class of thirty-four, a few weeks after the Civil War began with the attack on Fort Sumter. People liked Custer; they noticed him and indulged him but nobody expected much from him.

During the first confusing weeks of the war, events tossed Custer one way and another. On his arrival in Washington from West Point a chance introduction to Winfield Scott, the general in chief of the Union Army, resulted in Custer being sent with a dispatch to General Irwin McDowell across the District line in Virginia, where he was preparing to attack the Confederate Army the next day near a winding stream called Bull Run. Custer was in the fight, was shot at but survived, and thereafter peppered family and friends with long letters full of dramatic detail that placed him at the center of events. He wasn't making things up, just self-absorbed, and always excited most by whatever was happening to him.

Custer's luck came in two forms—the first was to be noticed and then favored by powerful men. Scott led to McDowell, and thence to McDowell's replacement as commander of the Army of the Potomac, General George B. McClellan, who put Custer on his staff, where he received a crash course in the politics of war. McDowell was a model general who did everything with energy except fight. But Custer himself saw plenty of action, was always favorably noticed, and on the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg was promoted from first lieutenant to brigadier general—five ranks in one jump!—and put in command of the Michigan Brigade at the age of twenty-three. A few days later a classic cavalry charge by Custer at the head of his men—"Come on, you Wolverines!"—routed a detachment of Confederate cavalry under General J. E. B. Stuart.

Stiles has a talent for describing military action, not just the clash of arms but the setting, the mood of the contending forces, and the meaning of the result. His account of Custer's feat on the third day at Gettysburg is soberly persuasive and yet full of awe at the miracle of it. In the battle generally considered the turning point of the Civil War, on the very part of the field that helped to decide the battle, Custer in his first week as a general whipped one of the greatest cavalry commanders in history.

That episode pretty well captures the tenor of Custer's Civil War. He was in a full roster of significant fights—Antietam, Trevilian Station, the Battle of the

just about everything I've said is in dispute by somebody, and sometimes by whole platoons of students of the battle, most of whom want to exonerate Custer, or at least include others in the blame. The record has grown so large that it requires a big chunk of a book just to introduce the leading characters, explain why Washington wanted and forced the war, sketch in the map of the five-mile-long battlefield, outline the chronology of the fight, and identify the many points in dispute before retelling the story of the fatal day and hazarding some new interpretation that is certain to meet a storm of contradiction.

Some very good books about Custer have followed this pattern, but *Custer's Trials*, T. J. Stiles's important and original new life of the general, does not. He seems to have gazed into the dark swamp of the controversy and concluded that nothing new could be learned from revisiting old ground. So he did not, and decided to leave out the battle. The body of his text ends as abruptly as a cliff with Custer marching out of Fort Abraham Lincoln in Dakota Territory at the head of the 7th Cavalry, while the regimental band played "The Girl I Left Behind Me." All twelve companies of the 7th were under his command for the first time, and they were going out to whip the Indians. This is the point where

strange, and it leaves a reader wondering what is to be gained by tackling Stiles's substantial book.

Ignore those doubts. He is an accomplished biographer (Jesse James and Cornelius Vanderbilt, which won a Pulitzer Prize); and he has a deep understanding of nineteenth-century American politics, business, and military history of the Civil War era. *Custer's Trials* offers ample reward for anyone interested in Custer, in the way golden lives run off the rails, in how large events can be prompted by small persistent flaws of character, or in the way a writer in command of his material can force a reader to take a fresh look at an old subject as buried in stale argument as a fossil embedded in rock. Stiles does not spell out his strategy but it is clear. To understand what Custer did on the fatal day, he believes, we must know who Custer was.

About Custer's life before he entered West Point in 1857 Stiles tells us little, but at that point the future general springs into the full light of history, pretty much as he remained until the end—a nice-looking, high-spirited fellow, eager to make an impression, obsessed with women, full of confidence, addicted to practical jokes, lazy in his studies, a truster in his luck, poised with



Wilderness, Third Winchester, where he helped win the victory that secured Lincoln's reelection in November 1864, Cedar Creek, and the final weeks of chasing down Robert E. Lee and the remnant of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House. Custer inspired confidence equally in the generals above him and the men who followed him. "So brave a man I never saw," a major in the Michigan cavalry wrote home after the Battle of Gettysburg. "Under *him* our men can achieve wonders." Custer was wounded lightly a couple of times, nothing worse. Once or twice he attacked foes who were too many or too tough, but luck always got him out again.

Custer could ride, was a good shot, and was brave to a fault, but so were a lot of other young cavalry officers, especially in the armies of the South. Custer's gift that mattered most was something like an athlete's instinct for the unfolding of play in a heated game. On a battlefield he knew where everybody was, where they were going, where they were weak or off-balance, what they were trying to do, what they weren't expecting. Custer was what the noted military writer S. L. A. Marshall, speaking of the Oglala Lakota chief Crazy Horse, called a "battlefield plunger."

It was Custer's luck of the first kind that put him in command of the Michigan Brigade at the right moment, and it was Custer's luck of the second kind that let him survive not just Gettysburg but a dozen other fights where a chance bullet or the sniffles followed by pneumonia might have ended his life. That and an unmarked grave were the

common end of thousands of promising lives. But Custer was fortune's child, generals depended on him, he was noticed and celebrated. He married the prettiest girl in Monroe, Michigan, and he stole the show at the Grand Review celebrating victory in Washington a month after the war when his horse, spooked by a garland of flowers tossed to the boy general, tried to throw him but failed while thousands watched. You can't overwrite the dazzling arc of Custer's war, but his career after the war was a different matter.

The first and bitterest sting was being dropped back into his rank in the regular army, which was captain. Friends in high places soon got him a position as lieutenant colonel in a new regiment of cavalry, the 7th. Technically Custer was second in command but most of the time the regiment's colonel was on leave or on detached duty. Pieces of the 7th under Custer were sent here and there after the war, to maintain civil peace during Reconstruction in Texas and Kentucky, and to secure the Kansas frontier from Indian attack. "The 7th Cavalry," Stiles dryly notes, "would serve as a complete unit only once in Custer's lifetime, with disastrous results."

The second half of *Custer's Trials* lavishes narrative attention on three connected stories—Custer's sometimes stormy relationship with his wife Elizabeth, called Libbie, who wrote three remarkable memoirs of her life with "the General"; Custer's education in fighting Indians, which involved much floundering at the outset; and Custer's

addiction to risk, which made him bold in war and reckless in peacetime in the pursuit of fortune at cards or in business. No one has dug more deeply, or with better literary effect, into the Custer record than Stiles, always excepting the final battle. He has read about that, too, of course, but not with the same focused passion for mastery. From Custer's half-mad desire to dazzle the world and Libbie, and from his way with war, Indians, and risk, Stiles has coaxed forth the patterns of character that help to explain how the man who whipped Stuart at Gettysburg was annihilated by the Lakota and Cheyenne at the Little Bighorn. Explaining that is ultimately the point of going to so much effort, but Stiles has another goal: to explain how Custer fit comfortably into the post-Civil War world of American striving and acquisition.

Custer established his reputation as an Indian fighter with an attack on a village of Cheyenne on the Washita River in Oklahoma in November 1868. Behind the attack were the usual causes—Indian reluctance to remain on a reservation where there was never enough to eat, raids by young warriors on settlements, a storm of angry editorials from western newspapers, stern warnings from agents and military officers. Placed in command for the campaign by one of his old mentors, General Philip Sheridan, Custer drove his men until scouts reported discovery of a winter camp of hostile Indians along the Washita. He followed the textbook and attacked at first light. The official tally was 103 dead Indians; 875 dead horses, shot on Custer's order; and the burning of fifty lodges

with all their stores for winter—in short, a mighty victory soon celebrated by *Harper's Weekly* with a double-page engraving of officers and men of the 7th charging with revolvers blazing. In a moment Custer had regained his place as a national hero.

But a counternarrative soon developed. Some said (now many say) that Custer had attacked the wrong Indians, a village under one of the Cheyenne peace chiefs, Black Kettle. In the wild melee women and children were shot down along with the men. But the sharpest criticism centered on the fate of Major Joel Elliott, who had charged upriver in mid-battle with nineteen men after some fleeing warriors. Soon after, another officer of the 7th, Lieutenant Edward Godfrey, discovered, when he had a chance to look from a rise, that the river was lined with Indian lodges as far as he could see. Without knowing it Custer had attacked a huge winter camp, a thousand lodges in all.

Godfrey hurried back with the news. Custer did not linger to learn the fate of Elliott and his men, but departed briskly as soon as the 7th had finished its job of destruction. Two weeks later the bodies of Elliott and his men were found naked, shot up and bristling with arrows. One of Major Elliott's close friends in the 7th, Captain Frederick Benteen, grasped the bitter truth immediately—the general had simply abandoned the major to his fate. But in retelling this episode Stiles is quicker to fault Benteen, the officer who likened the dead at the Little Bighorn to scattered corn, than Custer. "If disharmony in the 7th Cavalry began with anyone," he writes, "it was with

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The plot line in *Below the Line in Beijing* is fairly simple, though its structure is somewhat complicated. The novel has four main characters: an unnamed narrator—a 61-year-old U.S. Customs Department lawyer, writer of China travel articles and former track star; his wife, Sheryl—a very attractive, professor of Asian Art; his psychoanalyst, Isaac Lutansky—a short version of Sigmund Freud; and his friend Jim—an unrepentant philanderer, former clothes model and current fashionista.

When the book begins, the narrator awakens next to Sheryl in their Baltimore home with an erection pressed against her thigh. Though initially pleased by his desire for his wife—he's had little sexual interest in her for quite awhile—he soon discovers it comes packaged with an inability to speak. This peculiarity becomes more confounding when he finds that, while mute in English, he can communicate in the foreign languages he knows. Although he can only guess at the reasons for his muteness, he does connect it to three apparently unrelated intrusions into his life: a quirky stuttering problem; powerful fantasies about hooking-up with young women; and fortuitously running into Jim after not having seen him for over forty years.

Of course, Freud's talking cure requires talking and as Lutansky only speaks English, several weeks after the narrator becomes mute, they agree to suspend their work. Soon thereafter, as planned, the narrator and Jim travel to Beijing for the 2008 Summer Olympics, the narrator first and Jim several days later. While the narrator, a proficient Mandarin speaker and expert on things Chinese, expects to dominate their relationship in Beijing, Jim takes over as soon as he arrives and leads them on a quest for young women. The ending takes place at an elegant Chinese brothel and is one of the most satisfying parts of the novel.

While the novel's most poignant erotic scenes might bring to mind Nabokov's *Lolita*, its larger literary influence is Freud. And right out of the Freudian book, the narrator's story is one of a not-too abnormal mind gone awry and attempting to heal itself, both with and without Lutansky's help.

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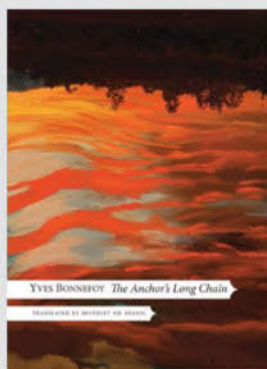
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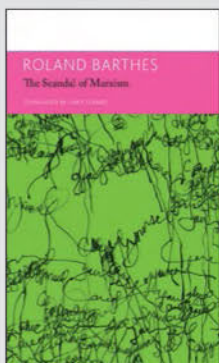
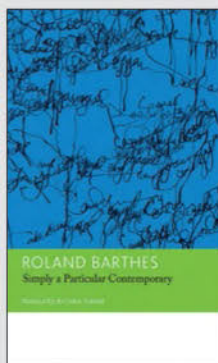
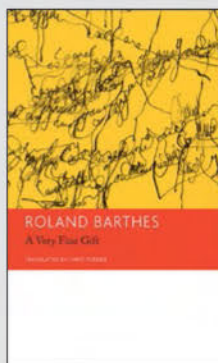
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Captain Benteen, a soft-faced but bitter man. . . . He hated Custer immediately." Well, the reader is inclined to ask, why not?

Stiles gives us a final insight into Custer's state of mind in the months before he rode off to whip the Indians in Montana. The proper word for it might be despair, or perhaps desperation. This emerges in a brief but lucid account of Custer's "business life," which amounted to reckless financial speculation in New York City, where he lived for two long periods. Of business he knew nothing. An initial effort to promote the notional "Stevens Lode Silver Mine" west of Denver went nowhere. The idea was to issue stock and run up the shares with publicity and rumors until the "owners," Custer and a handful of plutocrats who "bought" shares at a fraction of par, could sell out and let the buyers shift for themselves. It might have worked if someone had paid attention to the mine itself, but no one did.

A second bid for riches ended more badly still when Custer in New York in late 1875 tried to make a fortune on the stock market through short-selling. He had no feel for markets and no access to genuine insiders. His guesses tended to be wrong. Trades totaling \$398,983 left him \$8,578 in debt, a stupendous sum for a light colonel in the army. "It was larger than the annual salaries of major railroad presidents," writes Stiles. In February 1876 Custer issued an IOU for the whole of his losses at 7 percent interest, with a promise to pay in six months—August 1876. Libbie made no mention of these troubles in her memoirs, and probably had only a faint understanding of the situation.

To get out of this mess would require a miracle of the sort that saved Custer time and again during the war. Now he was thirty-five, he was dead broke (if the accounting was honest), chance of promotion in the post-Civil War Army was slim to zero, and he had half a year to brood upon the size of the miracle he would need to pay that note when it fell due. Facing all that, roughly, is where Stiles leaves him—Custer with the bloom off, riding out at the head of a regiment of cavalry to see if a rousing victory over the Indians could deliver a miracle.

Custer's personal story ends with shocking completeness as he disappears downriver with his detachment a little after noon on the fatal day. If Stiles wished to argue (as many have) that responsibility for the disaster falls wholly or partly on someone else, there is much he might have said, but if he believes, as his book implicitly argues, that the disaster was Custer's doing, there is no need to press further. It is this clarity of judgment that sets Stiles's book apart from all others. He sticks to the life, in effect telling the reader that Custer was the cause—the man brought it on himself.

But then in the epilogue something odd happens. Stiles betrays a certain softening, a holding back, a hint of readiness to offer excuses. The wavering emerges from his account of the proceedings of a court of inquiry into the battle held in 1879. Its purpose was to weigh the behavior of Major Reno, Custer's second-in-command, whom many had accused of cowardice. In the course of the inquiry attention was fo-

cused as well on Captain Benteen, to whom Stiles has taken a sharp dislike, singling him out as an unreliable narrator—a probable liar, in fact. The dislike is almost visceral, the way two men at a party with only a word or two might be on the verge of a fistfight. Benteen's testimony at the Reno court of inquiry, Stiles writes,

established one thing for certain: it is possible to sneer continuously for days at a time. He appeared in the full flower of his petty arrogance, steeped in an embittered subordinate's nitpicking resentment and a pervasive disdain for Custer.

Where does this vehemence come from? Why is Stiles expressing it now?

The inquiry established that the first phase of the battle, an attack on the southern end of a huge Indian village by Reno with about 110 men, ended with his retreat to a hilltop back across the river where he was joined by Benteen with a detachment of similar size. Custer meanwhile had disappeared downriver with five companies of the 7th, about 210 men, after promising to support Reno's attack with "the whole outfit." A principal question at the inquiry was whether Reno, as the senior officer on the hilltop, and for that matter Benteen, too, could have and should have known that Custer, far from able to support Reno with "the whole outfit," was in desperate straits himself.

This is not a question that can be answered with a simple yes or no. But Stiles without further argument reaches a harsh judgment. "It is striking," he writes,

that Benteen, who loathed Custer for purportedly abandoning Maj. Joel Elliott and nineteen men at the Washita, should so lightly excuse his own abandonment of ten times as many troops. Could his and Reno's combined battalions have reached Custer, let alone rescued him? No one can ever know. What is certain is that they never tried.

This turns facts on their head. Reno and Benteen did not abandon Custer. They were pretty sure, in fact, that he had abandoned them, just as he had Elliott. But Stiles is harsh; he is saying that Reno and Benteen should have tried to rescue Custer, which must mean they are at fault for not trying, which in effect says the blame must be at least partly theirs. With this stinging judgment Stiles has plunged his book into the thick of the old arguments. All come from the impulse to defend Custer, to avoid saying plainly what was obvious from the first day: that he picked a fight he could not win.

But it would be pointless to go on. Stiles has already refused this quarrel. His final judgment raises questions he has made no serious effort to address, much less answer. I can offer only one explanation for this last-minute change of heart: Custer had a way about him and by the time Stiles reached his final pages, he had fallen under the general's spell. This leaves us with a split judgment. If you want to understand the battle you will have to look elsewhere. But if you want to understand how Custer's character became his fate, then Stiles's book is the one to read before any other. □



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# Eye on the Present—The Whig History of Science

Steven Weinberg

It was the Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield who described and condemned what he called “the Whig interpretation of history.” In a book with that title, the young Butterfield in 1931 declared that “the study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistries in history...”<sup>1</sup> He spread special scorn on those historians, including Lord Acton, who subject the past to contemporary moral judgments, who for instance are unable to see the Whig Charles James Fox as anything but a savior of British liberties. Not that Butterfield was personally unwilling to make moral judgments; he just did not think it was the business of historians. According to Butterfield, the whig historian studying Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century feels that some “loose threads are still left hanging unless he can show which party was in the right.”

Butterfield’s strictures were fervently taken up by later generations of historians. Being called “whig” came to seem as terrifying to historians as being called sexist, or Eurocentric, or Orientalist. Nor was the history of science spared. The historian of science Bruce Hunt recalls that when he was in graduate school in the early 1980s, “whiggish” was a common term of abuse in the history of science. To avoid that charge, people turned away from telling stories of scientific progress or from giving “big picture” stories of any kind, and shifted to accounts of small episodes, tightly focused in time and space.

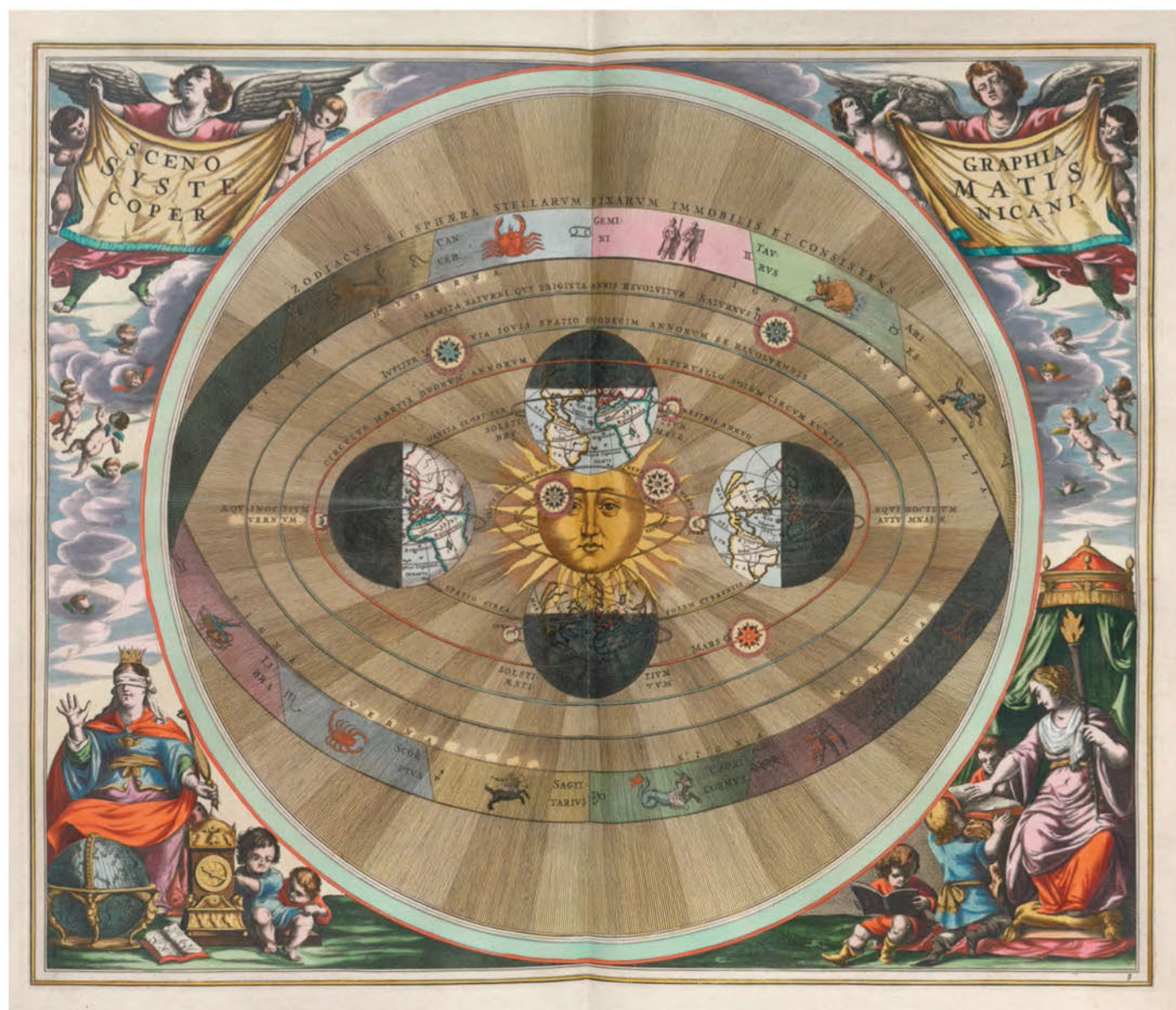
Nevertheless, in teaching courses on the history of physics and astronomy, and then working up my lectures into a book, I have come to think that whatever one thinks of whiggery in other sorts of history, it has a rightful place in the history of science. It is clearly not possible to speak of right and wrong in the history of art or fashion, nor I think is it possible in the history of religion, and one can argue about whether it is possible in political history, but in scientific history we really can say who was right. According to Butterfield,

we can never say that the ultimate issue, the succeeding course of events, or the lapse of time have proved that Luther was right against the Pope or that Pitt was wrong against Charles James Fox.

But we can say with complete confidence that the lapse of time has shown that, about the solar system, Copernicus was right against the adherents of Ptolemy, and Newton was right against the followers of Descartes.

Though the history of science thus has special features that make a whig interpretation useful, it has another aspect that makes the idea of keeping an eye on the present troublesome to some professional historians. Historians who have not themselves worked as scientists may feel that they cannot match

<sup>1</sup>In this essay, I will follow Butterfield in capitalizing “Whig” when it refers to a political party, and leaving the *w* in lower case when referring to an intellectual tendency.



‘Scenography of the Copernican World System’; engraving from Andreas Cellarius’s *Harmonia macrocosmica*, 1660

the working scientist’s understanding of present science. On the other hand, it must be admitted that a scientist like myself cannot match the professional historian’s mastery of source material. So who should write the history of science: historians or scientists? The answer seems to me obvious: both.

I should disclose that I have a dog, or at least a book, in this fight. In *To Explain the World: The Discovery of Modern Science*, based on my lectures at the University of Texas at Austin, I acknowledged that “I will be coming close to the dangerous ground that is most carefully avoided by contemporary historians, of judging the past by the standards of the present.” Reviews were generally favorable, but one in *The Wall Street Journal* (by a professional historian) took me to task for my attention to the present. The review was headed “The Whig Interpretation of Science.”

Now, some criticisms of whiggery, by Butterfield and others, are either irrelevant to the history of science or not controversial. Certainly we should not oversimplify or pass moral judgments, designating some past scientists as spotless heroes or infallible geniuses, and others as villains or fools. For instance, we must not gloss over Galileo’s getting it all wrong in a debate over comets with the Jesuit Orazio Grassi, or Newton’s fudging his calculations to achieve agreement with observations of the precession of the earth’s axis. In any case, it is ideas and practices that we should hold up to present stan-

dards, not individuals. Above all, we must not imagine that our predecessors thought the way we think, only with less information.

It is Butterfield’s injunction against presentism, “the study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present,” that still represents a serious challenge to whiggish historians of science. In laying out maxims for a history of science that emphasizes its internal development, Thomas Kuhn in 1968 argued that “insofar as possible (it is never entirely so, nor could history be written if it were), the historian should set aside the science that he knows.”<sup>2</sup> A more uncompromising stand against using present knowledge was taken by several sociologists who study science as a social phenomenon, including the well-known Sociology of Scientific Knowledge group at the University of Bath.

Meanwhile, whiggery in the history of science has not lacked defenders. They are found especially among those, like Edward Harrison, Nicholas Jardine, and Ernst Mayr, who have worked as scientists.<sup>3</sup> I think that this is

<sup>2</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, “The History of Science,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Macmillan, 1968), Vol. 14, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup>Edward Harrison, “Whigs, Prigs and Historians of Science,” *Nature*, Vol. 329 (September 1987); Nick Jardine, “Whigs and Stories: Herbert Butterfield and the Historiography of Science,” *History*

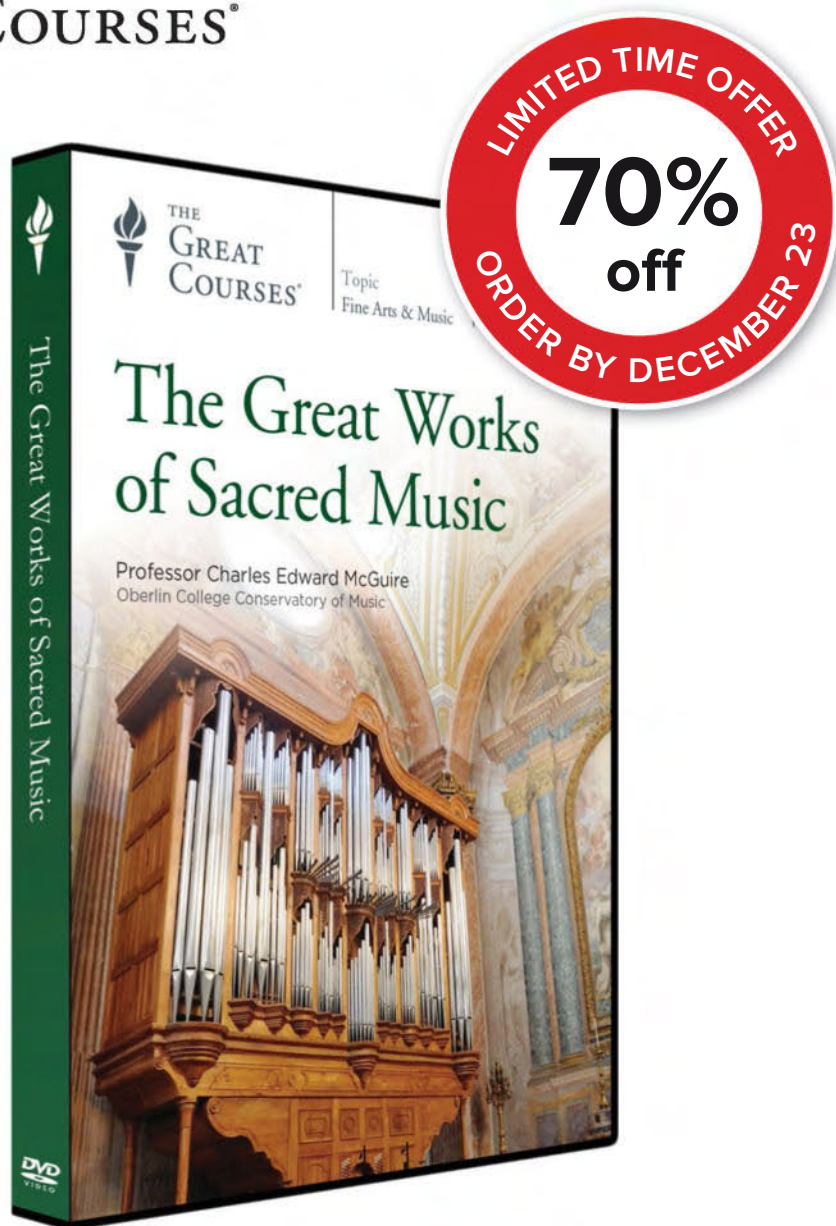
because scientific history with an eye to present knowledge is needed by scientists. We don’t see our work as merely an expression of the culture of our time and place, like parliamentary democracy or Morris dancing. We see it as the latest stage in a process, extending back over millennia, of explaining the world. We derive perspective and motivation from the story of how we reached our present understanding, imperfect as that understanding remains.

Certainly history should not ignore those influential past figures who turned out to be wrong. Otherwise we would never be able to understand what it took to get things right. But the story makes no sense unless we recognize that some were wrong and some right, and this can be done only from the perspective of our present knowledge.

Right and wrong about what? A whig history of science that amounts just to a totting up of plus and minus scores for whatever facts a past scientist has gotten right or wrong would not be very interesting. Much more important, it seems to me, is to trace out the slow and difficult progress that has been made over the centuries in learning how to learn about the world: What sort of questions can we hope to answer? What sort of notions help us to these answers? How can we tell when

*of Science*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (June 2003); Ernst Mayr, “When Is Historiography Whiggish?,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (April/June 1990).





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an answer is correct? We can identify which historical practices set future scientists on the right path, and which old questions and methodologies had to be unlearned. This can't be done without taking account of our present understandings, so painfully acquired.

For an example of a whiggish judgment of the past, take the ancient fundamental question: Of what substance is the world made? Much credit is often given to Democritus of Abdera, who around 400 BC proposed that matter consists of atoms moving in the void. One of the leading universities in Greece today is named after Democritus. Yet from a modern perspective, the good guess of Democritus about atoms represented no progress in the methods of science. None of the many surviving fragments of Democritus's writings describe any observation that could suggest the existence of atoms, and there was nothing that he or anyone else in the ancient world could do with this idea that would confirm that matter really does consist of atoms. Though right about matter, Democritus was wrong about how to learn about the world. In this he was not alone; no one before Aristotle seems to have understood that speculative theories about matter need to be confirmed by observation.

One's judgment of Aristotle provides a good test for one's attitude toward the history of science, for Aristotle was in a limited sense the first scientist, and much of the subsequent history of science consisted of responses to his teaching. Aristotle argued that the earth is a sphere, not only on the theoretical grounds that this shape allows the greatest amount of the element earth to get closest to the center of the cosmos, but also on the basis of observations: the shadow of the earth on the moon during a lunar eclipse is curved, and the starry night sky changes its appearance as one travels north or south.

However, Aristotle's work shows no understanding that mathematics should be an important part of the study of nature. For instance, he made no attempt to use observations of the night sky at different latitudes to estimate the circumference of the earth. His theory that the planets ride on spheres pivoted on other spheres, all with the earth at their center, agreed only qualitatively with their observed apparent motions; but the failure to get quantitative agreement with observation did not bother him or many of his followers.

Mathematics began to be used constructively in scientific theories in the Hellenistic Age and then in the Greek part of the Roman Empire. Around 150 AD Claudius Ptolemy put the final touches on a mathematical theory of the solar system that agreed pretty well with observation. (In the simplest version of Ptolemy's theory, planets travel along circles called epicycles, whose centers travel around larger circles that have the earth at their center.) With the benefit of present knowledge this agreement is not surprising, because in its simplest version Ptolemy's theory gives precisely the same predictions for the apparent motions of the sun, moon, and planets as the simplest version of the later theory of Copernicus. Yet for a millenium and a half there continued a debate between followers of Ptolemy, called astronomers or mathematicians,

and adherents of Aristotle, often called physicists. Ptolemy was wrong about actual motions in the solar system, but right about the need for quantitative agreement with observation.

It was one of the great achievements of the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to work out the modern relation of mathematics and science. Mathematics had been important to the Pythagoreans as a form of number mysticism, and to Plato as a model for a purely deductive science that experience has shown could never work. The modern relation between mathematics and natural science was spelled out by Christiaan Huygens, in the 1690 preface to his *Treatise on Light*:

There will be seen in [this book] demonstrations of those kinds which do not produce as great a certitude as those of Geometry, and which even differ much therefrom, since whereas the Geometers prove their Propositions by fixed and incontestable Principles, here the Principles are verified by the conclusions to be drawn from them; the nature of these things not allowing of this being done otherwise.

The remarkable thing is not that Huygens understood this, but that, well into the seventeenth century, it still needed to be said.

Aristotle saw no need for experiment in the sense of the artificial arrangement of circumstances that are more revealing than what we encounter naturally. This presumably was because he thought there was a profound difference between the natural and the artificial, with only the natural world worth study. Like Plato, he thought that it is only possible to understand things when one knows their purpose. These ideas stood in the way of learning how to learn about the world.

Such judgments on Aristotle and on his followers are just the sort of thing that is still often condemned by some historians—keeping one eye on the present in studying the past. For instance, a distinguished historian of science, the late David Lindberg, commented that

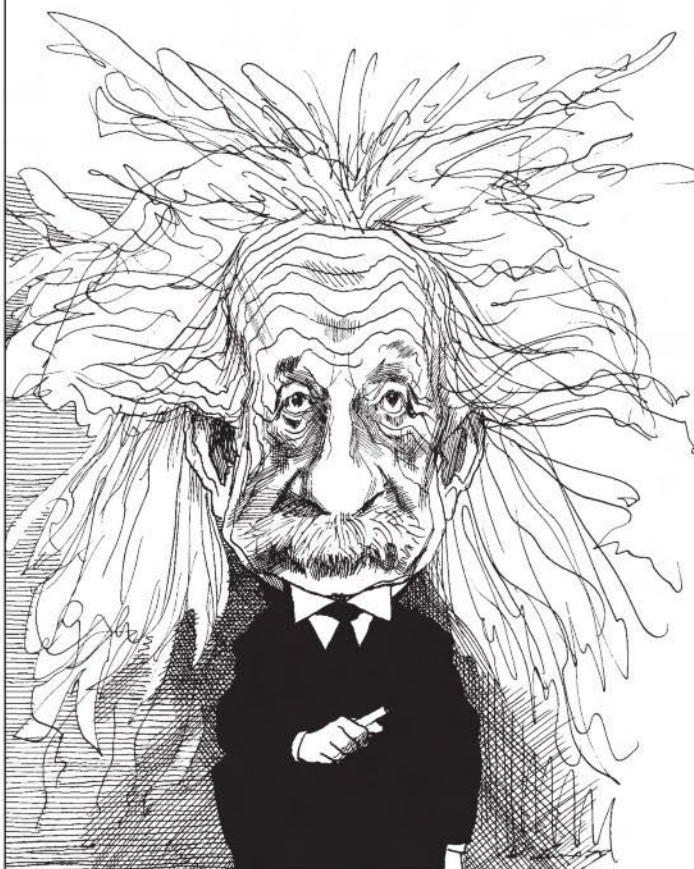
it would be unfair and pointless to judge Aristotle's success by the degree to which he anticipated modern science (as though his goal was to answer our questions, rather than his own).<sup>4</sup>

And in a second edition of the same work: "The proper measure of a philosophical system or a scientific theory is not the degree to which it anticipated modern thought, but its degree of success in treating the philosophical and scientific problems of its own day."

<sup>4</sup>David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 BC to AD 1450* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

To me this is nonsense. The point of science is not to answer the questions that happen to be popular in one's time, but to understand the world. Not that we know in advance what kinds of understanding are possible and satisfying. Learning this is part of the work of science. Some questions like "What is the world made of?" are good questions, but are asked prematurely. No one could make progress in answering this question until the advent of accurate measurements of chemical weights at the end of the eighteenth century. In the same way, the effort at the start of the twentieth century of Hendrik Lorentz and other theoretical physicists

Albert Einstein



to understand the structure of the recently discovered electron was premature: no one could make progress on the electron's structure until the advent of quantum mechanics in the 1920s. Other questions like "What is the natural place of fire?" or "What is the purpose of the moon?" are bad in themselves, leading away from real understanding. Much of the history of science has been a matter of learning what sort of questions should and should not be asked.

I am not arguing that whig history is the only interesting sort of history of science. Even a whig historian may be interested in exploring the impact of general culture on developments in science, or vice versa, without needing to worry about the role that these developments played in progress toward modern science. For instance, the atomic theory of Democritus offered an illustration of how the world might work without the intervention of the gods, and thereby had a great influence a century later on the Hellenistic philosopher Epicurus and later still on the Roman poet Lucretius, an influence that did not depend on whether the theory was well grounded by modern standards, which it wasn't. Likewise, you can feel the impact of the scientific revolution on general culture in such works as the poetry of Andrew Marvell (I think particularly of his poem "The Definition of Love"). The influence

also runs in the opposite direction. The sociologist Robert Merton argued that Protestantism had a major part in fostering the great scientific advances of seventeenth-century England. I don't know if that is true, but it's certainly worthy of interest.

But there is an element of whiggery even here. Why should a historian of science focus on the intellectual environment of, say, Hellenistic Greece or seventeenth-century England, if it were not that something was happening then that advanced science toward the present? The history of science is not merely a tale of intellectual fashions, succeeding one another without direction, but a history of progress toward truth. Though this progress was denied by Thomas Kuhn, it is felt strongly by working scientists. Thus whig history is not just one of several interesting kinds of scientific history. The evolution over many centuries of modern science is a great story, as important and interesting as anything else in the history of human civilization.

Butterfield himself seems to have had a sense of the legitimacy of whiggery in the history of science. In his 1948 lectures at Cambridge on the history of science, he attributed a historical importance to the scientific revolution that he would never grant to England's Glorious Revolution, so beloved of the Whigs.<sup>5</sup> I found his account of the scientific revolution thoroughly whiggish, and that impression was shared by others, including A. Rupert Hall, a student of Butterfield's.<sup>6</sup>

Much earlier, in *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Butterfield had already

shown himself potentially receptive to a whig interpretation of history under some conditions. He acknowledged that if morality were "an absolute system, equally binding on all places and times," then the historian would "be driven now to watch the story of men's growing consciousness of the moral order, or their gradual discovery of it." Though a devout Methodist, Butterfield did not believe that there is an absolute moral order that is revealed to us by history or religion or anything else.<sup>7</sup> But he did not doubt that there are laws of nature, equally binding on all places and times. It is precisely the story of the growing consciousness of the laws of nature that the whig historian of physics hopes to tell, but the story cannot be told without keeping an eye on our present knowledge of the natural world. □

<sup>5</sup>Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science* (1950; revised edition, Free Press, 1957).

<sup>6</sup>See the closing lines of A. Rupert Hall, "On Whiggism," *History of Science*, Vol. 21, No. 45 (1983).

<sup>7</sup>For Butterfield's religious views, see Michael Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, Science and God* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).



# The Sultan of Turkey

Christopher de Bellaigue

Ever since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Turkish citizens have been living with the bitter consequences of their government's involvement in the conflict. Along with the US, Turkey's policy has been to get rid of the Assad regime, but this has not worked. Bashar al-Assad has been strongly defended by his Iranian and Russian backers, and he has cannily given up territory abutting Turkey to Syrian Kurds from the Democratic Union Party, called the PYD. As described by Jonathan Steele in a recent article in these pages, the Syrian Kurds have successfully resisted ISIS in the area on the Turkish border known as Rojava and inspired fellow Kurds on the other side of the border to assert their claims to self-determination.\* Kurds are estimated to make up between 15 and 20 percent of Turkey's population of 78 million, and anti-Kurdish sentiment is running very high.

Turkey has received, housed, and passed on many millions of Syrian refugees at great cost to itself, and its provisions for refugees have been more humane than those of other governments. But many in Turkey see the success of the Kurds in Rojava as a threat.

The policies of Turkey's Islamist president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are the cause of many of his country's failures in Syria. (Having first become prime minister in 2003, he was elected president in August 2014.) Still, when Turks went to the polls to elect a new government on November 1 of this year, they did not turn against Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). Instead their vote suggested that they blamed themselves for having denied the AKP an overall parliamentary majority in an earlier election held on June 7.

That June election established a minority government, led by the AKP, which presided over a period of great violence and instability beginning on July 20 when a Kurdish suicide bomber killed thirty-three people, most of them Kurds, in the border town of Suruç. The violence reached a climax on October 10, when two other bombers (one of them the brother of the Suruç bomber) blew themselves up in the middle of a peace march in Ankara, killing 102 people. In both cases the carnage, generally believed to have been plotted by ISIS, was facilitated by official negligence in providing security. That did not stop the AKP from presenting the blasts as yet more evidence that the party should be given a mandate to rule on its own. On November 1 voters returned the AKP to power with a strong working majority. (Following the ISIS attacks against France on November 13, Erdoğan called for a "consensus of the international community against terrorism.")

Rarely can an electorate have changed its mind so decisively over such a short period. On June 7 the AKP won 41 percent of the vote, giving it 258 deputies in Ankara's 550-seat parliament, with the remainder going to

three opposition parties that managed to clear the 10 percent threshold necessary for parliamentary representation. They were the center-left Republican People's Party, or CHP (which won 25 percent of the vote), the far-right Nationalist Action Party, or MHP (16 percent), and the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP, which became the first Kurdish nationalist party to clear the threshold, with 13 percent.

Five months later, in the November 1 election, the AKP increased its share of the vote by 8.5 percent, or more than 4.5 million votes, capturing 317 seats.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the Yıldız Palace, Istanbul, October 2015

It had notable success in cutting down the MHP vote to only 11.9 percent. The Kurdish nationalist HDP cleared the 10 percent threshold by a mere 0.8 percent; had it failed to do so, most of the party's fifty-nine seats would have gone to the AKP. As it is, the AKP's strong comeback has virtually guaranteed that the party will stay in power until 2019. Erdoğan has pulled off the classic politician's trick of successfully selling the panacea for an ailment largely of his own making.

One lesson of the election seems clear. Given the chance, people who live in a region that has been torn apart by political instability will often prefer continuity to a potentially dangerous leap into the unknown. In the Middle East, the citizens of Iran have never seriously tried to bring down the Islamic Republic, notwithstanding the resentment they feel. In 2011 Saudi citizens did not take part in the Arab Spring, despite confident predictions that they would be "next." In both countries, the spectacle of neighboring countries in flames reinforced a fear of upheaval. Then there is the economic prosperity that a long period of AKP power has brought to Turkey, creating the new middle class that strongly supports Erdoğan. For these reasons, on November 1, Turkey became a third example of such expedient caution.

Erdoğan's dominance of Turkish politics is both a consequence and a cause of the weakness of the country's institutions. As an ambitious prime minister in the 2000s, he cut back the power

of the country's secular military and civilian bureaucracies, which had used strong-arm tactics with many human rights abuses including torture, aimed at preventing Islamists such as Erdoğan from assuming power in the past. This campaign culminated in August 2013 with the jailing of dozens of high army officers, including a former chief of the general staff, for plotting against the government. Senior officers nowadays shy away from making any decision of consequence. As a European diplomat in Turkey put it, "You won't find four Turkish generals in a room these days,

banned travel by a further fifty-four prosecutors and judges on suspicion of terrorism or attempting to overthrow the government. Rightly or wrongly, some have been said to have connections with Gülen.

Erdoğan is also crushing his enemies in the press. Several journalists are in jail, most of them on national security charges such as abetting terrorism; others have been silenced through intimidation or defamation suits brought by the president or his supporters. In February the long-established commentator Kadri Gürsel used his column in the newspaper *Milliyet* to denounce the "murder" of Turkish journalism at the hands of the government's "totalitarian worldview." *Milliyet* fired him five months later, after he tweeted about the irony of world leaders sending their condolences to Erdoğan—whom Gürsel called "the number one reason for terrorism"—following the Suruç bomb blast.

A few days before November's general election, the police raided and shut down two pro-Gülen TV stations that had been critical of the government. On November 2 the editor of the current affairs magazine *Nokta* and a colleague were arrested on suspicion of "fomenting armed rebellion" when they published a cartoon of Erdoğan dressed as a commando with the caption, "The Beginning of Turkey's Civil War."

Shortly before the election, I visited Can Dündar, the editor of the opposition daily *Cumhuriyet*—and the defendant in a lawsuit charging him with espionage that could put him in prison. Earlier in Erdoğan's period of political dominance, Dündar told me, Turkish politics at least had "braking" mechanisms—the "army, the press, . . . Gülen, the prosecutors. But Erdoğan has eliminated all of these. There is no brake and we are heading for the wall."

On the day after the election, Dündar began his published analysis of the results with a description of the view from his window:

I write these columns in a building that has been completely surrounded by police. An armored car waits in front of the building. The entrances to the streets have been barricaded shut. A few streets away are the offices of two newspapers and two TV stations that last week underwent a change in management and editorial line as a result of government pressure. . . . Fear took the electorate prisoner.

Such fear affected voters, and persuaded them to reverse the verdict they had delivered in June. The pious Sunni Turks who are Erdoğan's main constituency became more drawn to him than ever. The fear Dündar describes reveals much about the Kurds and other minorities that have emerged as Erdoğan's most significant adversaries.

What now seems central is Erdoğan's move from prime minister to president in August 2014, when he won 52 percent of the vote in the first direct

\*See "The Syrian Kurds Are Winning!," *The New York Review*, December 3, 2015.



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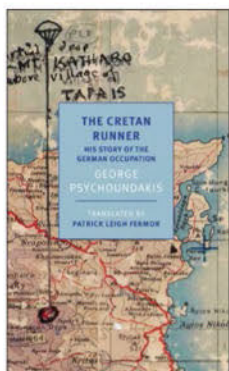
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presidential election in Turkey. He made no secret of his desire to change the constitution to create what is being called an "executive presidential system," under which it is expected that the president would appoint the cabinet and have the power to dissolve parliament, as well as control defense and foreign policy. While he continues to exercise his considerable existing powers over the army, Erdoğan claims that a new simplified system would free Turkey to develop faster economically. "We have to move fast without getting bogged down," he said.

At the time it seemed that Erdoğan would need the support of a number of Kurdish nationalist deputies in order to make the constitutional changes he seeks. Ever since 1984 the PKK has been fighting the central government in

in Syria. As the fighting intensified and the number of Kurdish casualties grew, Erdoğan resisted pressure to allow Kurdish fighters from Turkey to go into Syria. It's widely accepted in Turkey that the president was hoping ISIS would crush Kobani and the other self-governing Kurdish cantons; but this would have brought him into disagreement with the US, which saw the Syrian PYD—despite its links to the Turkish PKK—as a potentially useful ally against the jihadis.

In late October 2014, under intense US and domestic pressure (there was much rioting by Kurds inside Turkey), Erdoğan allowed arms and men into Kobani, and this, along with American air strikes, helped to turn the battle in the defenders' favor. The entire canton of Kobani has since been liberated

alist party in Turkish history—and it was achieved partly by the estimated 1.7 million non-Kurdish votes. With his eighty MPs Demirtaş represented a big threat to Erdoğan's ambitions.

Whoever was responsible for the dreadful events of this summer, Erdoğan has taken advantage of them. As the violence has polarized Turkish society, the government calculated that it could win back its majority and push the Kurdish vote below the 10 percent threshold. The Suruç and Ankara bombings marked the low point in relations between the state and the Kurds. Although the suicide bombers were Kurds, Demirtaş, without specific evidence, accused Erdoğan of direct involvement in the bombings. For the most part, foreign security experts do not support such conspiracy theories;



the southeast where the Kurds are a majority, a war that has cost some 45,000 lives and devastated much of the region. Since 1999 the former PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan has been a prisoner of the Turkish state, but he is permitted to make public statements that have had a generally restraining influence over the rest of the Kurdish movement. In March 2013 he announced a cease-fire and the withdrawal of PKK units from Turkey to bases in northern Iraq, which is controlled by Iraqi Kurds.

Beginning before the withdrawal, negotiations were going on as part of a peace process between the government, Öcalan, and Kurdish nationalist politicians in Turkey. Then last summer the Syrian Kurds started to consolidate their power in Rojava; their success was seen as threatening by Erdoğan. The Turkish government and its Kurdish interlocutors had been discussing a deal by which the Kurds would support Erdoğan's presidency in return for constitutional changes, among them a widened definition of citizenship that would officially include the ethnic Kurds within Turkey. The deal would also involve compulsory education in Kurdish in Kurd-majority areas and administrative decentralization. But any such understanding between the president and the Kurds became moot after the Syrian Kurds began to consolidate their power in Rojava in the summer of 2014.

In September 2014 ISIS made a determined effort to take over the PYD-controlled border town of Kobani

from ISIS by the Syrian Kurdish forces, and the alliance between the US and the Syrian Kurds has blossomed—to Turkey's irritation.

Erdoğan's reluctance to come to the defense of Kobani cost him his image as a trustworthy interlocutor with Kurds and, in the short term at least, his dream of an all-powerful "executive presidency" that could dominate the government. In March 2015 Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party, declared that he would engage in no "dirty bargaining" with the AKP: "We will not allow you to become executive president."

At that time Demirtaş enjoyed much prestige as the civilian representative of a movement that seemed on the verge of committing itself to achieving its goals by constitutional means, and that also seemed to be gaining ascendancy over the PKK commanders who had taken refuge in their mountain bases in northern Iraq. Öcalan, from his prison island, has not come down decisively on either side; he tries to balance hawks and doves in the movement.

Apart from defending the Kurds and their rights, Demirtaş also promises dignity and equal rights for other minorities in Turkey, such as the Alevis, a quasi-Shia group estimated to have a population of 13 million, and the country's small Christian communities, which Erdoğan has insulted and neglected. The 13 percent of the vote that the HDP won in June was by far the best result by any Kurdish nation-

but one I spoke to said that the Turkish government had been guilty of "appeasing" ISIS, some of whose members have old links to members of the AKP.

There have been many reports in the Turkish media suggesting that the authorities loyal to Erdoğan have failed to break up ISIS cells even after tip-offs from the families of recruits, and there were noticeably few security measures on the day of the Ankara blasts. The two bombers who were suspected of terrorism and were on wanted lists were able to make their way into a large crowd after traveling hundreds of miles from the Syrian border.

The bombing of Kurds in the border town of Suruç in July provoked PKK militants who had in any case been stockpiling arms in anticipation of fresh hostilities. On July 22 two Turkish policemen were shot dead—the PKK claimed responsibility for the killings—and since then the country has been consumed by violence that recalls the peak of the civil war in the 1990s. Hundreds of people have been killed by the police and army and thousands arrested. The PKK has accused the Turkish air force of destroying the graves of militants during its frequent bombing raids on PKK camps in northern Iraq. According to Human Rights Watch, Erdoğan's security forces have "engaged in severe ill-treatment and abuse of detainees," beating them and threatening them with execution.

In August the PKK declared that a



string of towns across the southeast would henceforth be “autonomous regions,” which lightly armed Kurdish militias would be prepared to defend. The army reacted with large-scale operations. In Diyarbakır, the unofficial capital of Turkish Kurdistan, the Kurds’ rudimentary defenses were quickly overwhelmed, leading to several deaths, damage to buildings and infrastructure, and the imprisonment of scores of young men.

When I visited Diyarbakır in October, the streets of the old city bore the scars of fighting and were virtually deserted except for Turkish army units conducting house-to-house searches. My Kurdish guide grimly predicted more violence. It is hard to see what the PKK’s declaration of autonomous zones has achieved aside from more bitterness and the curtailment of any kind of economic activity.

Turkey’s use of military force and the vigor of the PKK’s response have left advocates of peace without any plausible position—surely part of Erdoğan’s design. When Demirtaş criticized the PKK’s armed defense of the autonomous regions, he was accused of naïveté by Mustafa Karasu, one of the PKK’s top commanders in the field.

The PKK’s return to fighting clearly lost Demirtaş votes among both moderate Kurdish nationalists and non-Kurds who could not bring themselves to vote for a party associated with attacks on soldiers and policemen. (Their funerals are shown nightly on the evening news, stoking further anger.) But Karasu and other PKK leaders had long expressed doubts over Demirtaş’s pursuit of non-Kurdish votes and his relations with the Turkish authorities.

After the vicious bombing in Ankara, Demirtaş called off all election rallies and spent much time attending the funerals of the thirty-four party colleagues who were among the dead. HDP offices around the country were attacked by Turkish nationalists, and the pro-government media imposed a de facto ban on news about the party. Demirtaş went briefly to London, reportedly after receiving death threats. All the while, Erdoğan campaigned hard for the AKP, although according to the constitution, he should, as president, be impartial.

On October 20 the AKP prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, told a crowd in the largely Kurdish town of Van that if his party was not elected it would spell the return of the “white Toros”—the Turkish name for the Renault 12, a car associated with the gendarmerie’s fearsome intelligence agents, who carried out thousands of extrajudicial executions of Kurdish nationalists during the 1990s. This was a remarkably overt threat for a head of government to make to his own people, and a sign of the perversion of democratic norms that has become common in Turkey.

In October, Angela Merkel came to Istanbul to ask Erdoğan to ease Europe’s refugee crisis by looking after more Syrians, Turkey having already devoted more shelter and services to refugees than any other country. She held out the promise of aid, the lifting of visa requirements for Turks wishing to enter the EU, and German support for advancing Turkey’s long-standing (and long-dormant) application to join the EU.

Merkel’s visit came at a time when Turkey was subsiding into chaos as a result of a deliberate government strategy, although she made no public mention of this. In Turkey the pro-government media showed pictures of the two leaders on thrones in an Ottoman palace dating from the empire’s late, degenerate phase. All the while, a short distance away, along the shores of the Bosphorus, businessmen continued to do a brisk trade in dinghies and outboard motors intended to convey Syrian refugees to Greece, while many would try to reach Germany.

In the aftermath of Erdoğan’s election triumph, with the EU in need of his help and US criticism muted because American warplanes are using Turkey’s Incirlik air base to bomb ISIS, Erdoğan may well feel his moment of vulnerability has passed. On November 4 he urged parliament to change the constitution to provide for an “executive president” with increased powers. This would require thirteen opposition MPs to vote with the AKP to hold a referendum approving the introduction of a regime conferring greater authority on Erdoğan. Why does he insist on having his dominance of Turkish politics confirmed in a new constitution? When the details of the constitutional changes he proposes are revealed it will not be a surprise if he demands more involvement in appointments to senior judicial positions, which would, if events turn against him, protect him and his family from prosecution.

Also on November 4 Erdoğan promised to continue the fight against the PKK “until all its members surrender or are eliminated.... The period ahead of us is not one of talks and discussions.” His words came amid reports of clashes between the Turkish military and PKK forces that had taken refuge in Iraq. The PKK has long demonstrated its ability to evade defeat on the battlefield. I was told in Diyarbakır that there is a steady stream of recruits to the PKK’s fighting forces. Turkey’s Kurdish politicians who are committed to an electoral process stand to lose most from the resumption of fighting, particularly Demirtaş, whose HDP is barely hanging on to its status as a parliamentary party.

Threats from the Kurds, an economy that is now faltering, and the wider repercussions of events in Syria will soon challenge Erdoğan’s apparent confidence. In the long term, ISIS may be another threat. The jihadis dislike his regime, which is not nearly pious enough for their taste. Although ISIS is believed to have been behind the Suruç and Ankara blasts, so far it has refrained from directly attacking the Turkish state itself, whether its army or its civil administration. But should Turkey and ISIS engage in combat, the movement’s cells within the country may prove too widespread, and too well-entrenched, to be quickly defeated.

Erdoğan’s reading of the electorate has been masterful, but he lacks the magnanimity that is essential for effective leadership. His pugnacity and lack of judgment suggest a paranoid character who is all too willing to behave like the wrathful “sultan” depicted by his critics. The president’s version of democracy is a numbers game, in which the majority wins the right to crush the minority. Turkey seems bound to suffer for it.

—November 18, 2015

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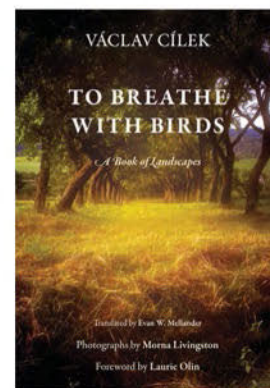
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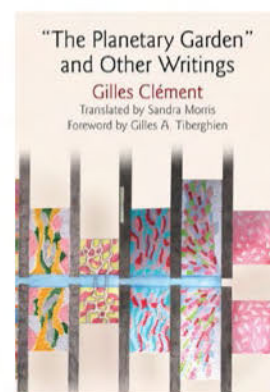
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# Finding a Lost Ireland

Fintan O'Toole

**The Dirty Dust/Cré na Cille**  
by Máirtín Ó Cadhain,  
translated from the Irish by Alan Titley.  
Yale University Press, 308 pp., \$25.00

**The Key/An Eochair**  
by Máirtín Ó Cadhain, translated  
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Dalkey Archive, 109 pp., \$14.95 (paper)

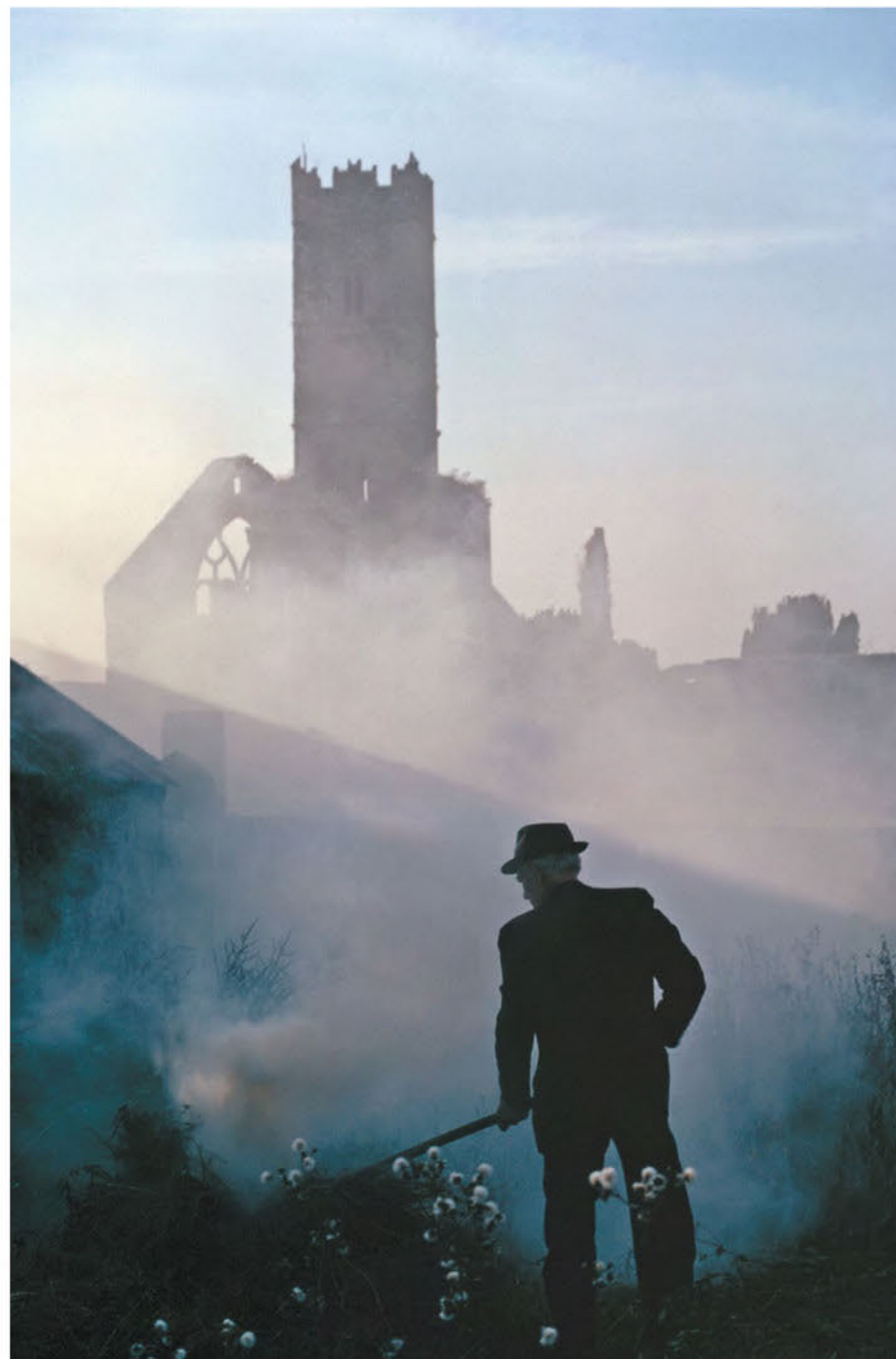
**Languages of the Night:  
Minor Languages and the Literary  
Imagination in Twentieth-Century  
Ireland and Europe**  
by Barry McCrea.  
Yale University Press, 177 pp., \$40.00

It seems rather apt that the physicist Erwin Schrödinger spent the years of World War II in Dublin. Schrödinger's famous thought experiment in which a cat is simultaneously alive and dead might have been devised especially for Irish writing of the period. A kind of suspended animation, a state of being eternally undead, was constantly evoked. It was already present at the start of the war: Flann O'Brien's masterpiece *The Third Policeman*, written in 1939 though not published until 1967, has a narrator who, though he does not know it, is both alive and dead, trapped in a banal Hell that he mistakes for an Irish village. But Ireland's experience of neutrality in the war, holding its breath on the margins while the fate of the world was being decided, perhaps intensified the feeling that there is no great difference between life and afterlife.

It was in Dublin at the end of the war that Samuel Beckett had the idea that writing could itself exist as the afterlife of expression, with momentous consequences for the novel and for drama. Yet what is most remarkable is that something of the same notion was brewing in the minds of writers whose social, linguistic, and political backgrounds were completely different from Beckett's. The most important of them was the Gaelic-language prose writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain (pronounced Marteen O'Kine), whose own masterpiece, *Cré na Cille*, first published in 1949, now appears for the first time in an English translation, by Alan Titley, under the title *The Dirty Dust*.

If Beckett's revolution was partly shaped by his wartime experience of hiding out in an isolated French village, Ó Cadhain and some of his contemporaries had an even more intensive experience of confinement. The extreme nationalist Irish Republican Army allied itself with the Nazis on the timeworn principle that any enemy of England must be a friend of theirs. The prime minister, Eamon de Valera, seeing this as a direct challenge to his policy of trying to keep Ireland out of the war, cracked down on his former comrades in the IRA, eventually interning many of them without trial in the old Curragh military camp outside Dublin.

Strikingly, much of the most interesting writing in Ireland in the decade after the war came out of this group of prisoners. In their work, many of the things we might otherwise call Beckettian—the strange energy of entropy, the melding of life and death, the sense of entrapment, the intense gossip that



Connemara, Ireland, 1972; photograph by Thomas Hoepker

fills the void of silence, above all the idea of waiting—had nothing to do with Beckett, who was then unknown to the vast majority of his compatriots. Those themes and devices seem to reflect, rather, the purgatorial realities of imprisonment. Two of the prisoners wrote plays actually set in jails: Seamus Byrne's *Design for a Headstone* and Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*. In both, the only real action is that of waiting for a death foretold. (In Behan's play, as in *Waiting for Godot*, the title character never appears.)

But a third prisoner, Ó Cadhain, went much further. As if picking up on the similarity of internment to interment, he translated the prison entirely into a place of living death, a rural cemetery in which the dead live on forever beneath the ground, in a perpetual afterlife that is neither heaven nor hell but just an eternal, inescapable purgatory. The black joke is that it is a purgatory in which nothing ever gets purged. All the sins, all the slights, all the resentments of life carry on regardless. The title page of *Cré na Cille* says it all: "Time: For Ever; Place: The Graveyard."

Ó Cadhain spent almost all of the war years behind bars, first in Arbour Hill

prison in Dublin and then, from April 1940 to July 1944, in the internment camp at the Curragh. His political activism was rooted partly in nationalism but largely in his rage at the poverty of the Irish countryside. He was born in 1906 as the eldest survivor of thirteen children. His parents were typical natives of Connemara, the rugged area west of Galway city on Ireland's Atlantic coast: Gaelic-speaking small farmers who eked a living from stony soil and the exposed seashore. *Cré na Cille* has its moments of rapture in which the defiant beauty of this landscape of rock and water are celebrated. The Trumpet of the Graveyard, a stentorian voice that from time to time breaks in through the cacophony of human chatter that forms the novel, evokes in biblical tones the wonders of life outside the graveyard:

Above the ground there is the light and lively lissom lap of air. The full tide is begotten with gusto in the pulse of the shore. The grass of the meadow is like unto that which had a vessel of fresh milk poured upon it.

A newly arrived corpse remembers a tryst: "The lights were glimmering on the headlands and on the darkling

pastures on the other side of the bay." But these evocations of the romance of the Connemara landscape serve largely to mock the poverty of the lives lived within it.

The Gaelic-speaking Atlantic fringe had long been mythologized as a place apart, the repository of a heroic, ancient, preliterate culture. After Irish independence in 1922, these so-called Gaeltacht (Gaelic-speaking) areas were officially treasured as the living linguistic fossils from which a new Gaelic Ireland could be reconstructed. Gaelic, which was still the majority language well into the nineteenth century, had been gradually abandoned by its speakers, not least under the pressure of mass migration to English-speaking countries. In theory, places like Ó Cadhain's native Cois Fharraige (a scattering of tiny Connemara villages) were to be the little springs from which a great national language revival would flow.

In practice, nothing actually changed for the Gaeltacht poor. The vast disjunction between rhetoric and reality might be said to be beyond satire, except that Flann O'Brien managed it superbly in his darkly hilarious pastiche of the autobiographies of Gaeltacht peasants that had become central to the revivalist movement. In *The Poor Mouth*, published in 1941, O'Brien has Gaelic scholars abandon the fictional town of Corkadoragha because "the putridity of the countryside was too putrid.... The poverty of the countryside was too poor.... The Gaelicism of the countryside was too Gaelic."

The rage that animated Ó Cadhain as an activist and then as a writer came from being trapped inside this absurdity. It is a rage against the dying of a light. The poverty of the countryside from which he sprang was indeed too poor, not merely to accord with his sense of social justice, but to sustain a living linguistic community. For Irish officialdom, and for some scholars, the Gaeltacht was a kind of folkloric human zoo, a linguistic game reserve. In *Cré na Cille*, Ó Cadhain relentlessly satirizes this whole approach. One character teaches an ambitious scholar from Dublin a word of Gaelic for every pint of porter he buys him, a rate of consumption that eventually kills the teacher. A Free French pilot, buried in the graveyard after his plane ditched in the Atlantic (such pilots who survived were interned along with Ó Cadhain in the Curragh camp), hatches a scheme for the cemetery and its garrulous inhabitants to become an ethnographic museum:

He also wants to collect every piss and piddle of folklore that he can, and save it so that every new generation of Gaelic corpses will know in what kind of republic former generations of Gaelic corpses lived.... He says it would be easy to make a Folklore Museum of the Cemetery, and that there'd be no problem getting a grant.

For Ó Cadhain, by contrast, the language could not be preserved while its native speakers struggled for survival on their small farms or, as many char-



acters in *Cré na Cille* do, left them to find work in England or the United States. Gaelic for him was not an abstraction or a revivalist project. It was simply his own language: he later recalled that he never even heard a word of English spoken until he was six years old. His precocious intelligence earned him a scholarship to a teacher training college in Dublin but even as a student his social awkwardness seems to have been connected to a lack of full fluency in English.

He eventually became multilingual, with a command of English and French and a good knowledge of Welsh, Breton, and Russian, but on the rare occasions he wrote in English, his prose is notably stilted. For good and ill, he had no choice but to write in a language whose active readers of serious literature could be numbered only in the thousands. Politically, his membership of the IRA and his strident campaigns for the rights of the Gaeltacht poor left him on the margins: he had already been fired from his job as principal of a small primary school before he was interned. Linguistically, he was in an even stranger place—the greatest living user of a language whose revival was an article of faith for Irish governments but who himself despised those governments. The ambiguity is summed up in a telling incident. While Ó Cadhain was interned as a danger to the nation, the authorities brought into the prison camp a special desk and chair so he could write comfortably. Typically, he refused the offer with indignation.

Yet Ó Cadhain cannot have been unaware that he was at the end of

something. Writing in Gaelic is the oldest indigenous (in the sense of non-classical) literature in Europe, stretching back to the early Christian monks who, rather audaciously, used the new tools of literacy to set down the myths and stories of their native culture. But Ó Cadhain is almost certainly the last person who will ever write major prose from entirely within that linguistic universe. While writing in Gaelic remains vigorous to this day, it is impossible to imagine anyone ever again coming to consciousness, as Ó Cadhain did, in an exclusively monoglot Gaelic world—today's Gaelic speakers are all at least bilingual and English is everywhere, not just in spoken and written discourse but in the electronic and online worlds. When *Cré na Cille* was first published, even the memory of Gaelic (still colloquially known as Irish) as the majority language of Ireland was all but gone. As Barry McCrea puts it in his wonderfully illuminating new study of the relationship between minority languages and modernism, *Languages of the Night*:

The forties and fifties were the first decades in which Irish as a naturally spoken language seemed never to have been “general over Ireland” but to belong as a matter of innate identity to the Gaeltacht, the preserve of a handful of specific areas of the country. Outside the Gaeltacht, the last traces of its living memory had now finally faded, and the link to Irish became a notional, abstract, and even somewhat mystical thing. The language was fossilized in place-

names, but alien to the people who lived there; it leaked, one might say, out of bodies and into the earth and air.

*Cré na Cille* is in essence a savage, uproarious, scabrous, obnoxious, and hilarious protest against precisely the notion that the language in which it is written is “a notional, abstract, and even somewhat mystical thing.” It is a smirking linguistic vampire, an apparently moribund language that declares: go ahead and kill me if you want; I'll still come back and bite you on the neck. In *Waiting for Godot*, “all the dead voices” make “a noise like wings.... Like leaves.... Like sand.” In *Cré na Cille*, all the dead voices make a noise like nosy neighbors, like bitter sisters, like jealous husbands, like real people squabbling and scheming, grabbing and gossiping. Ó Cadhain plucks the notion of a dead language out of the air of abstraction and mysticism and places it, quite literally, back in bodies. The novel is made up, like the language itself, of dead bodies talking, always decomposing but never decomposed, reverently buried but irreverently nattering on. The dead know very well that they are dead, but so what? In the opening section the newly interred Caitriona Paudeen is surprised to find herself a human version of Schrödinger's cat:

Christ's cross protect me!—Am I alive or dead? Are the people here alive or dead? They are all rabbiting on the same way as they were above the ground!

In a sense, Ó Cadhain has one up on Beckett. Beckett dreamed of writing in a “dead language,” which is to say a language that continues to speak after it has lost the power to express anything. In his radio play *All That Fall*, Mr. Rooney tells his wife Maddy that “sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language” and she replies, “Well, you know, it will be dead in time, just like our own poor dear Gaelic, there is that to be said.” Ó Cadhain might well have agreed. That the idea of dead language, or perhaps more accurately of undead language, was not confined to the plight of poor, dear Gaelic is evident from his bleakly funny satiric novella, *The Key (An Eochair)*, first published in 1953. A junior civil servant, a “paperkeeper,” gets locked in a windowless room where government files are stored. The mounds of paper are, nightmarishly, both dead and alive, entombed bureaucratic scribbles that come to life at night to continue their own squabbles:

Some of them, no matter how far back they were shoved into the darkest recesses, managed, somehow, to make their way back to the light. And those that were left out in the light weren't happy unless they were in the dark. It was obvious that they held grudges and fought with each other as well. In the morning a file might be found dented, or the head of one might be butting another. There were even civil wars between files.

But Ó Cadhain's main concern was with Gaelic, a language that for him

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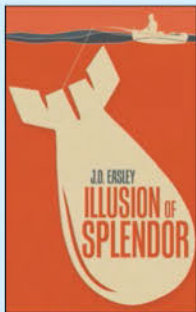


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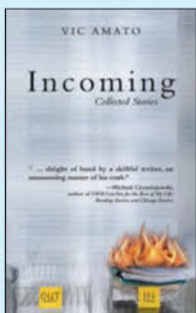
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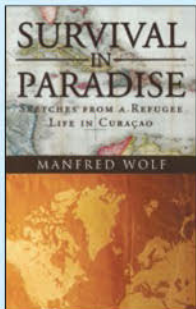
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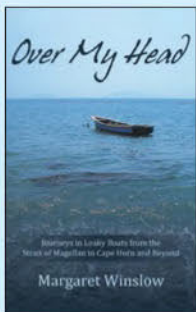
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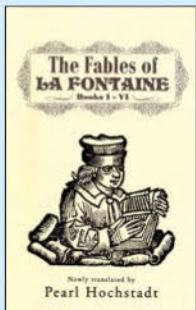


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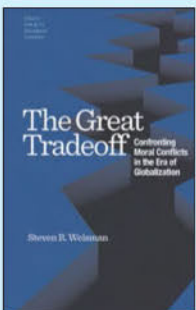
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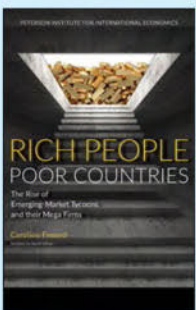
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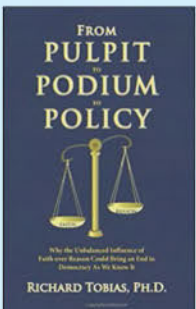
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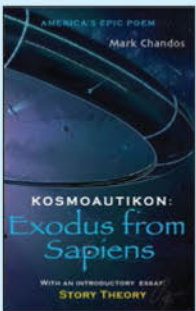
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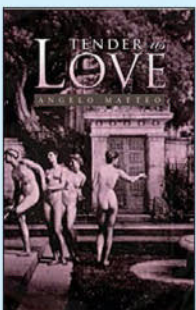
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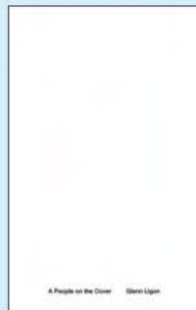
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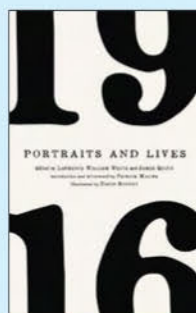
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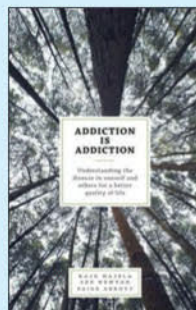
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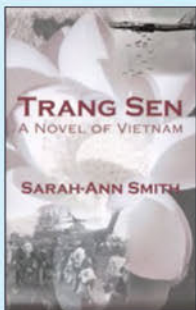
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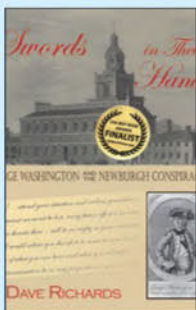
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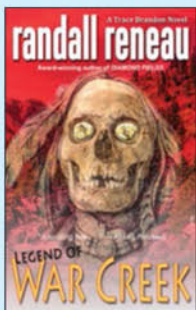
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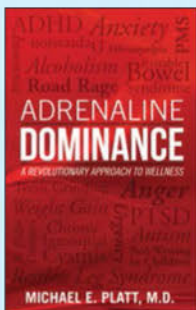
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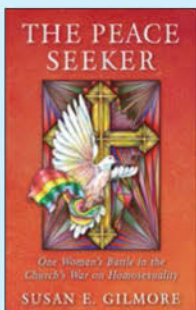
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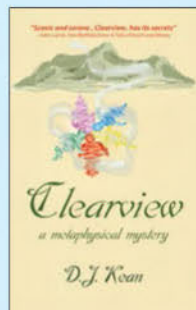
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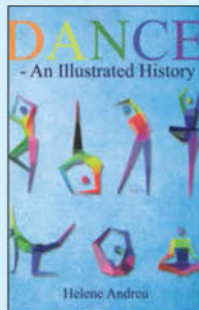


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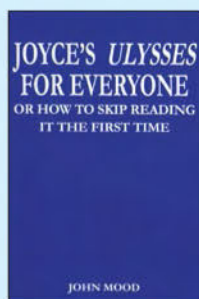


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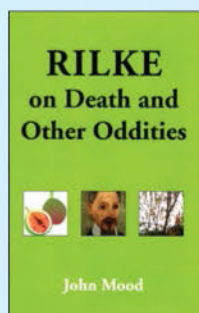
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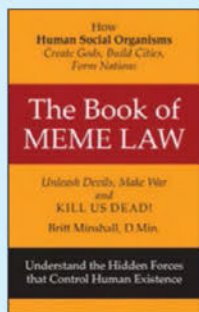
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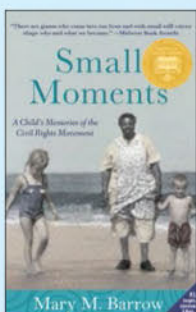
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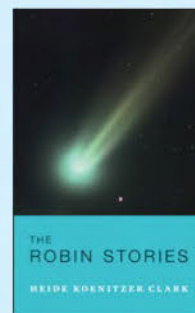
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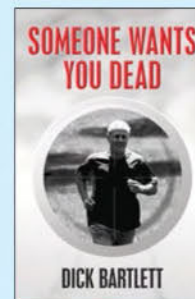


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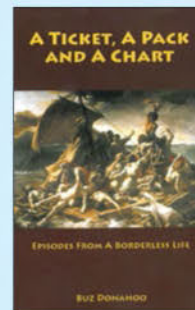
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was alive as a source of creation but also “dead” in the sense that it could no longer function as a fully public means of communication. Very few, even of his limited number of readers, could entirely enter into the nuances and intimacies of his uniquely rich Irish. When *Cré na Cille* was first published, even one of the leading scholars of the Gaelic language, David Greene (Ó Cadhain, shortly before his death in 1970, succeeded Greene in the chair of Irish at Trinity College Dublin), hailed it in *The Irish Times* as a triumph but noted that “there are few pages without at least one word unfamiliar to me. There would be nothing derogatory about supplying a glossary...”

Greene was not alone—few, even among those fluent in the language, find *Cré na Cille* entirely comprehensible. And this is quite deliberate: Ó Cadhain didn’t just use words current in Connemara speech, he searched out many that were forgotten or obsolete. His impulse in this was not antiquarian but decidedly modernist—words being used not just as referents but as objects in themselves.

The real wonder of *Cré na Cille*, though, is that it is so unheroic. Given its status as a kind of last will and testament of a 1,500-year-old tradition, it could be forgiven for lapsing into a mode of heroic defiance. The dead speakers, as holdouts of an ancient culture, must surely have something deep and soulful to impart from the grave. But on the contrary, they have little to say beyond backbiting and banality. Their worldview is utterly inward. The great questions of the war and of the Holocaust are reduced to the level of their own squabbles. At one point Caitriona Pauden whines that “this graveyard is worse now than those places the Frenchie was yacking on about the other day: Belsen, Buchenwald and Dachau.”

The petty snobbery of village society is fully reproduced in the cemetery—the inmates are segregated according to the cost of being buried in different plots and a fine marble cross is as desirable a status symbol as a new car is in the living world. Their interjections are repetitive loops of complaint: Caitriona Pauden’s foul-tongued vituperation against her sister Nell who, she believes, stole the love of her life, Jack the Lad, and her increasing annoyance as fresh corpses gradually bring news of Nell’s good fortunes; Dotie, from the fertile plains of the east who pines incessantly for her native soil; the old schoolmaster who is embittered by Caitriona’s revelation that his young widow has taken up with the postman; an insurance salesman who still delights in the tricks of his trade; two football fans still arguing about the outcome of the 1941 championship; pro- and anti-Hitler pub orators; the victim of a stabbing still accusing his murderer; Nora, who has discovered “culture” in death; a member of a lay religious group whose offers of “spiritual succor” are generally rebuffed; a writer aggrieved that his masterpiece was rejected before his death.

Indeed, the sixty or so characters are much more easily identifiable than might be supposed in a text that simply moves from one fragment of monologue to another, like a dial being turned on a radio, precisely because each has a kind of signature tune on which he or she constantly harps. Cumulatively, these banalities create the

dead-and-alive quality that Ó Cadhain is after—there is nothing to say but the verbosity through which it is expressed is astonishingly vivid.

Capturing that language in English is a formidable challenge. There could be no such thing as a neutral translation of a work so immersed in its own linguistic moment. Alan Titley’s version, indeed, is about as far from neutral as it is possible to go. Given that this is the first form in which most readers will encounter Ó Cadhain’s masterpiece, Titley is unusually insistent on imposing his own tone so heavily on it. That tone is both boldly vigorous and relentlessly vulgar. Caitriona Pauden, the most prominent voice, is salty and sharp-tongued, but Titley always chooses to dial up her foul-mouthed rants to the highest possible volume. The pleasures and dangers of this approach are apparent if we consider his translation alongside the only previous English-language version, Joan Trodden Keefe’s unpublished Ph.D. thesis for the University of California in 1984. Here is the opening paragraph in Keefe’s relatively literal version:

I wonder is it in the Pound Plot or the Fifteen-Shilling Plot I am buried? They are gone to the devil if they dumped me in the Half-Guinea Plot, after all the cautions I gave them! The morning of the day I died I called up from the kitchen to Patrick: “My request to you, Patrick my child,” I said. “Bury me in the Pound Plot. In the Pound Plot. Some of us are buried in the Half-Guinea Plot, but even if we are....

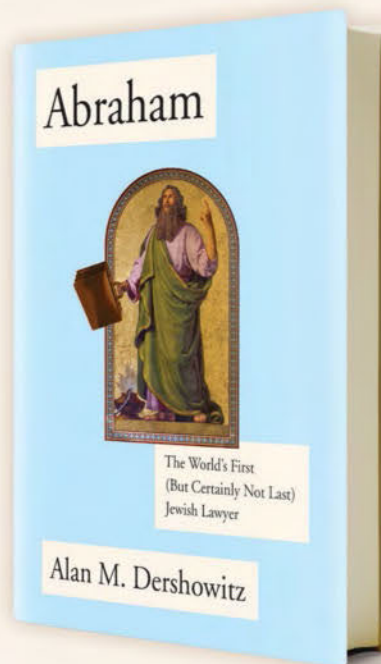
And here is Titley’s take on the passage:

Don’t know if I am in the Pound grave, or the Fifteen Shilling grave? Fuck them anyway if they plonked me in the Ten Shilling plot after all the warnings I gave them. The morning I died I calls Patrick in from the kitchen, “I’m begging you Patrick, I’m begging you, put me in the Pound grave, the Pound grave! I know some of us are buried in the Ten Shilling grave, but all the same...

It is immediately obvious that Titley’s approach is more colorful and more highly flavored but also that his favorite seasonings are strongly charged words like “fuck” and “cunt.” At every opportunity he translates ribald invective or Rabelaisian description into highly sexualized terms. Caitriona’s complaint about her sister, “I thought I would live for a couple of years more and bury the bitch before me,” becomes “I thought I’d live for another couple of years, and I’d bury her before me, the cunt.” Keefe’s “Let her have it below the belt!” becomes Titley’s “Give it to her up the arse!” “I let a spit out of me. It was as dry as bent-grass bramble” becomes “I spat out a glob. It was as stiff as a hard-on.” “Isn’t she an inquisitive brazen-face” becomes “Wasn’t she the cheeky cunt.” “Drone! Potbelly! Rattle-brain! Huckster!” becomes “The cunt! The bollocks! The knacker! The fucker!” “If you had a couple of well-set up girls in the office egging him on, maybe he would sign over the land

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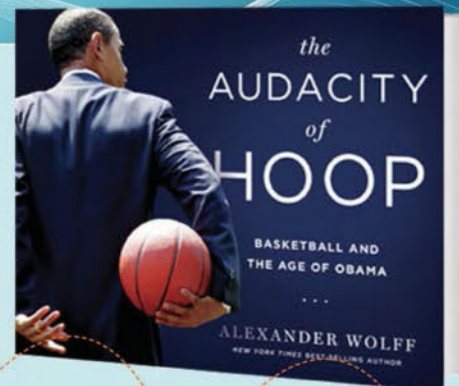
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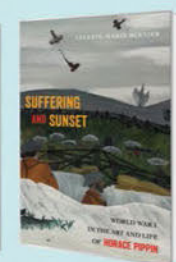
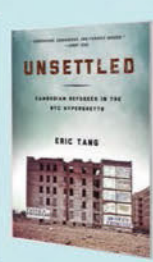
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to us. He has a great appetite for girls when he's tipsy..." becomes "If you had a couple of hot broads in the office getting him turned on, maybe he'd sign over the land to us. He's a whore for the young ones when he's pissed..."

Titley's versions are certainly direct and unfussy but the directness sometimes becomes bluntness and the un-

fussiness can also be a loss of verbal variety. Titley, moreover, mixes British and American slang indiscriminately ("hot broads" and "all over the bleedin' gaff," for example) and throws in apparently deliberate anachronisms. Caitriona, in the 1940s, uses "muppet" more than once as a term of abuse—the Muppets were created in 1954 and the

abusive use of the word begins much later. These are presumably conscious dissonances but as such the effects are of Titley's, not Ó Cadhain's, creation.

Perhaps these idiosyncrasies point toward yet another form of afterlife, that of multiple translations. Indeed, Yale University Press will publish a second translation of *Cré na Cille*, by

Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson, next year. Toward the end of his life, Ó Cadhain somewhat despairingly bemoaned his fate as a writer in what he then felt was, after all, "no longer a living language." Now it seems his greatest creation, disinterred at last, will walk the earth in many undead bodies. □

## The Revolutionary Christian Girl

Jenny Uglow

### The Match Girl and the Heiress

by Seth Koven.

Princeton University Press, 445 pp., \$35.00

Toward the start of his fascinating book *The Match Girl and the Heiress*, Seth Koven states that it "joins efforts by historians to reclaim pre-World War II Britain for Christianity, a salutary historiographical Reconquista." This may set alarm bells ringing, with its implication that more secular-minded scholars should be driven from the field, like the Moors expelled from Spain. But if the word "Reconquista" is unfortunate, he has a point. Surprisingly little academic attention has been paid to the part played by the Anglican Church, Catholic missions, and, above all, the Non-conformist sects in British reform movements, class awareness, women's history, and social protest. This is particularly clear in the missions and settlements set up in the slums of British cities following the initiative of F.D. Maurice and the Christian Socialists in the mid-nineteenth century.

*The Match Girl and the Heiress* reflects Koven's interest in the Christian revolutionaries who adopted voluntary poverty to counter social inequality and injustice. But he approaches his subject in an unusual and intimate way, by tracing the friendship between Muriel Lester (1883–1968), the charismatic daughter of a wealthy Baptist shipowner, and Nellie Dowell (1876–1923), a working-class girl from Bromley-by-Bow, in East London, and examining their work at Kingsley Hall, a settlement inspired by Muriel's personal brand of "God is Love" theology and her ambition to build a "New Jerusalem" among the tenements.

In his account of this utopian endeavor, a blend of radical Christian idealism and hard pragmatism, Koven considers wider issues. These range from public and private education to the workings of the Poor Law, labor struggles and capitalism, the "New Woman" and suffrage movements, the plethora of contemporary quests for spiritual guidance, and the subtleties of same-sex friendships. Emotional currents, personal and spiritual, drive the story—the word "love" and the phrase "God's love" echo through the book—and the author is unusually, and engagingly, open about his own feelings as he follows the different tracks of the women's lives.

The tone is set in the opening sentence: "I cannot say with certainty how and when they met, but I do know that



Edith Heckstall Smith: *The Match Girl*, circa 1884–1890

Muriel Lester and Nellie Dowell loved one another." Their backgrounds, however, could not have been more different. Muriel's father Henry had been born in Poplar in the East End, but once he made money he moved his family to leafy Leytonstone, and then to Loughton in Essex, where he was president of the Essex Baptist Union, a magistrate, and school board chairman. While Nellie endured a childhood of poverty and institutionalization, the Lester girls were sent to the progressive Wanstead College, and Muriel then went to St. Leonard's school in St. Andrews.

The Lester sisters belong to a group that featured in Koven's previous book, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in*

*Victorian London* (2004), one type of the "lady slum explorers" determined to help the poor. Indeed Muriel's initial love affair with Bromley-by-Bow and her avid anthropological fascination are described in both books. Her interest was born, she wrote later, of her

horrified curiosity about the dirty spaces and faces she glimpsed from her first-class train carriage as she sped from her country home through the slums of East London en route to the pleasures of the West End.

Visiting Bow around 1902, she was asked to a party of factory girls and

instantly found friends. Her memory of this night, in an unpublished draft of her autobiography *It Occurred to Me*, conjures up the heady romance of crossing class boundaries, a physical frisson found in middle-class encounters with factory life from Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South* onward:

These girls, who danced with me, entertained me, made conversation to set me at my ease and plied me with refreshments, were just like myself some of them, the same age, nineteen years old. Yet how experienced they seemed! How assured! What natural dignity! They were much more mature and independent than I.

Muriel's excitement is similar to that described in *Slumming* by the American journalist Elizabeth Banks, who entered London working life in disguise and also plunged into the world of New York immigrants. Here, she said, she found

Life! Life! Seething life was all about me. The life of a great city, its riches, its poverty, its sin, its virtue, its sorrows, its joyousness—there it was, and I was in it.

Like Banks, Muriel immediately turns her attention from the city-dwellers to herself, with a mix of egoism and altruism. Compared with the factory girls, she writes, "I was a pampered, sheltered, ignorant idler. Why should they go on working, producing pleasure and ease for such as I?"

Fired by a paradoxical desire to be part of this world while transforming its chaos and violence, Muriel and her sister Doris took lodgings in Bow, taking turns going back to Essex to look after their parents. Doris (the unsung heroine of this tale) organized a pioneering kindergarten and Muriel worked with the Factory Girls Club and ran the "Mothers' Meeting" at the Congregational church, inviting speakers to talk about industrial safety laws, staging concerts and competitions, and joining the church to the Bow suffrage movement.

At the meeting, we are told, the women "used religion and prayer to make sense of their day-to-day lives." Yet during these years, in which the exhilarated Muriel claimed that life in Bow brought "a serenity and selflessness almost beyond imagination," she also suffered from exhaustion and "nerves" (a standard Victorian diagnosis). After a collapse in 1906 she left



for a long period of rest in Essex, followed by travels to the Continent, expecting Doris to do the work for both of them—a pattern that would be often repeated.

Six years later, the sisters moved to a small terraced house in Bruce Road. Nellie Dowell lived in a first-floor flat next door with her mother and nephew, and two years later the two families pulled down the second-floor wall between the houses. The shared space became the “Kingsley Rooms,” named after Muriel and Doris’s brother Kingsley, who died in September 1914. These rooms led to a greater venture. By the end of that year, Henry Lester had bought an abandoned Baptist chapel nearby, encouraging his daughters to turn the former hellfire chapel into a community center, nursery school, and base for all their activities. This became “‘Kingsley Hall,’ Britain’s first Christian revolutionary ‘People’s House.’” Nellie was the “local friend” breaking down the “prickly barriers,” as Muriel put it, between rich and poor, easing the sisters’ determined program of visits, through which they built up their networks of followers, and helping to run the hall.

Nellie’s route to Kingsley Hall, through childhood poverty, brutal state institutions, and twenty years of work in the match factories, is the most impressive part of Koven’s book. It has a freshness and energy, as if the author was on a personal journey of discovery. Nellie was never Koven’s intended subject, he tells us. He went to look at the papers held at Kingsley Hall’s satellite

house in Dagenham looking for Muriel Lester: instead, reading her letters to Muriel, carefully placed in a manila envelope marked “Nell,” he writes, “I found Nellie Dowell.”

The letters reveal Nellie’s dependency and near adoration of “Miss Lester.” Although Koven compares her prose to the impressionistic terseness of Gertrude Stein, Nellie is more old-fashioned, writing a kind of speaking letter common in the nineteenth century, in which the gaps between thoughts or sentences are expressed by a gap rather than a stop. Every letter quoted rings with her assumption of difference and inequality, mixing deference with a strong sense that life in Bow is a great deal livelier and friendlier than the stuffy suburbs. Now the nights are drawing in, she writes,

Kingsley Hall will look like your lovely Hall at Loughton but how can it, that looks to clean only fit for Sunday clothes don’t touch but ours is come in don’t go home & change come & be happy (nice cup of tea a) Dough Nut or a cocanut Bar.

In his hunt to find more about Nellie, Koven acts like a family historian, searching through census data and parish registers, looking up school, hospital, and factory archives, following events in the newspapers, and then analyzes them carefully, relating her life story to current arguments about state intervention, the “loss of childhood,” and the power of capitalism. His insights supplement and correct Muriel’s 1923 obituary of her friend

and her essay “From Birth to Death,” which drew largely on the memories of Nellie’s mother Harriet.

Nellie’s comfortable early childhood ended when her father, a merchant seaman, died at sea in 1881, plunging his wife Harriet and their five children into poverty. Muriel’s account of Harriet’s struggles as a single mother forced her, Koven points out, into a “highly contentious and overtly politicized field of representations.” By the end of the century, “mothering” or “mothercraft” was seen by reformers not as a matter of instinct and feeling but as a science, a skill in which slum mothers were grievously lacking. Instead they were seen as pushing their children into work, abusing and neglecting them, even taking out insurance on their short lives. Finding no help, Harriet had to hand her children over to the Poor Law guardians, and as “semi-orphans” Nellie, aged seven, and her older sister Alice entered the vast Forest Gate Industrial School, which housed between six and eight hundred children: its unfeeling, mechanical routine left Nellie and many like her determined never to come within reach of the Poor Law again.

When she left there in 1888, Nellie found work with the match manufacturer R Bell and Company. The popular image of the “match girl”—derived from the street children selling matches, and from Hans Christian Andersen’s story of the girl sent out in the snow by her cruel parents to sell her wares—had by now become a famous image of London labor and exploitation, and the strike at the leading match firm of Bryant & May in July 1888 won wide-

spread sympathy. Appalled by what they learned of working conditions, pay, and the terrible affliction of “fossy jaw” from working with phosphorus, women philanthropists rallied around: Viscountess Clifden founded Clifden House opposite the factory, and Annie Besant started her theosophical club in Bow Lodge. Both places offered meals, reading rooms, entertainment, country excursions.

An acrimonious strike at Bell’s—in which Nellie took no part—won less support. Hoping to escape more trouble, the company set up a new factory in New Zealand, sending Nellie and a group of fellow workers there to train new employees. But once in Wellington the London match girls found themselves targets, entangled in heated union politics and arguments over the Liberal government’s betrayal of the protectionist policies it had promised. After three years Nellie sailed back to London, but was soon abroad again, working in one of the vast Swedish match factories at a time of global restructuring of the British industry. On her return she finally changed her job, working briefly at Cook’s East London Soap works, until one of her many bouts of rheumatic fever forced her to leave.

The great virtue of Koven’s approach is his constant probing of surfaces. He is never content simply to mention a school, a hospital, a factory, without examining the policies or commercial pressures, the attitudes of the public, the actual daily round and the experience of those who lived or worked

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—Picasso

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there, asking what it *felt* like, emotionally and physically. The most dramatic example of this immersion occurs with Nellie's traumatic stay in the famous voluntary teaching hospital, the London Hospital, in 1810, where Koven encounters the detailed case notes kept by well-intentioned but blinkered doctors and officials:

With utter detachment, the file preserves her doctors' evaluation of the condition of her body surfaces and orifices. Her teeth are dirty and she has two stumps in the back of her mouth; her tongue is "pink little furred;" her menstrual cycle ("catamenia") is "always regular" but she has "slight leucorrhoea" or vaginal discharge "present" during the doctor's physical examination.

The doctors failed to notice that despite her history of rheumatic fever and her recent illness, Nellie need never have been kept in the hospital—she was soon well enough to go home. Instead, stuffed with drugs, she developed fever and temporary delirium, ending in the ward for pauper lunatics, pressing her face against the bars, with tears streaming down her cheeks. Koven's exhilaration at finding this "brazenly invasive" file was, he says, "tempered by discomfort at reading it. Had Nellie Dowell, that perpetually obscured object of my historical sleuthing, come too sharply into focus?" In theory, her letters were more private, more intimate, yet these impersonal archives feel like snooping, an assault, a "breaking down of her personhood."

Yet Nellie did escape, and retained an inner strength. Rather to Koven's disappointment, in nearly twenty years of working in the match industry, she showed no defiant radicalism. Instead—just as interesting with respect to women's history and politics—she was simply determined to keep her job, "eager for approbation and respectability." But in New Zealand Nellie had encountered "a new respect for the dignity of labor and women": the bill granting women's suffrage had been passed there in 1893, almost thirty years before Britain.

Later, in Sweden, she began to question her conventional beliefs. In this she was influenced by the writings of her would-be suitor Harry Snell, who helped to formulate the principles of the Ethical Movement and was a founder of the Universal Races Congress in Britain, challenging imperialism and injustice—and sometime between 1903 and 1909, Nellie met Muriel Lester. Although Snell wrote frequently to Nellie, even during her travels in Sweden, there is no evidence that she returned his affections or that they had a romantic relationship. Nellie continued to work in factories until her physical collapse in 1910. From that moment until her death in 1923, she devoted herself to helping Muriel Lester in her philanthropic efforts and was financially supported, Koven thinks, by her wealthier friend.

If Nellie, the exploited worker, failed to become a "revolutionary critic" of capitalism, in what sense was Muriel's Christian ideology "revolutionary"—a term Koven often employs? It is hard to tell, in part because Muriel herself was so vague and so eclectic. Despite her often-mentioned "charisma," she remains curiously indistinct—I get a

stronger sense of her as a personality from Caroline Moorhead's description in *Troublesome People: Enemies of War, 1916–1986* (1987), quoted by Koven in a footnote: "A tall, stately, cheerful and occasionally scatty woman with wispy fair hair wound in Catherine wheels over her ears and rather long teeth." As Koven portrays her spiritual development, examining each stage with meticulous care, he risks making her a bundle of "isms" in the reader's mind. But her commitment is beyond doubt, and moving as she did between two worlds, exhausted and strained, it is understandable that from 1910 her "physical and mental health was so precarious that she often broke down and required Nellie's care."



A woman selling matches; from 'Cries of London,' circa 1840

"Being a Christian," for Muriel, meant "to let everyone want to copy me." To this end, she moved on from her sturdy Baptist childhood to engage with a variety of different movements: "A broad range of the theological ideas and social reform initiatives from the 1880s to World War I that revolved around 'God is Love' as the central fact of Christianity." Once she had rejected sin-based religion, with its threat of punishment, her politics and Christianity were always entwined: her humanitarian impulse was matched by a firm anti-imperialism, beginning with her support of the Congo Reform Association.

Muriel was inspired by Tolstoy's radical ethics, by the Brotherhood Church with its emphasis on restorative love, and on religious evolution leading to "the light of reconciliation and great peace." But she was also influenced by the ideas of the much-mocked "Simple Lifers"; and she embraced the feminine and anticolonial aspects of Theosophy as preached by Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant, although both she and Nellie remained wary of their fusion of Eastern and Western teachings. Her ideas derived most strongly, in the end, from the humanism, faith in reason, and social concern of the New Theology promoted by the flamboyant, electrifying preacher R. J. Campbell, whose ideas "provided a path into pacifism, internationalism, socialism, and religious modernism for the Lesters and

many other spiritual seekers." God, Campbell insisted, was both immanent and transcendent and the teachings of Jesus, in particular the Sermon on the Mount, remained thoroughly compatible with the modern world.

The Lester sisters were brave to found Kingsley Hall in wartime 1915 and to proclaim their pacifist beliefs in the face of intense hostility. The heroic local Labour politician and pacifist George Lansbury gave them warm support, but there was tension over support of the war with both the pro-war Philippa Strachey and the suffragettes of London Society (Muriel was briefly secretary of the Bow branch). Later Muriel and Nellie allied themselves with the pacifist feminists, including

was central, as Muriel wrote when Nellie died in 1923:

She cherished [the idea of the Hall], helped it to grow, made it seem real. Whenever the dream began to grow hazy she would discuss it in terms of flesh and blood and by fitting actual people into its imagined framework, she increased one's faith. After its birth, it was Nell one turned to in every crisis.

Muriel and Doris Lester both joined the pacifist Fellowship for Reconciliation in late 1915, and for a brief period, in the revulsion from militarism after World War I, their work for peace and social equality "increasingly seemed like a legitimate political and economic strategy, not the contemptible idealism of an eccentric pacifist fringe."

In 1921, buoyed up by hope, the better-off residents of Kingsley Hall, including Muriel, renounced their wealth in a well-publicized declaration of "Voluntary Poverty." The mood did not last: as far as local people were concerned, immersion in poverty was the last thing they wanted, while the middle-class workers began increasingly to feel the need for privacy and comfort. As Koven notes:

In coming face-to-face with the psychic and affective impossibility of giving up entirely the "private" and "private life," Muriel necessarily gestured toward the limits of revolutionary Christianity and her own pursuit of moral "perfectionism."

Kingsley Hall changed, but endured: it was a soup kitchen during the General Strike of 1926, and in the 1960s took on a different radical life as R. D. Laing's experimental community for schizophrenics. It is still a thriving community center today. But Muriel changed too, turning to more public work. After a spell as a socialist feminist member of Poplar Borough Council from 1922 to 1926, her belief in reconciliation between races, as well as classes, took her increasingly away from Poplar and Bow. In the mid-1920s she was in India, visiting Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi, who stayed at Kingsley Hall on his visit to Britain in 1931. She became an international emissary for peace, corresponding with viceroys, prime ministers, and peace campaigners: by the time of her death in 1968 she had been twice nominated for the Nobel Prize and was viewed as a "pacifist saint."

As she traveled and worked, she maintained a series of intense friendships with working women who cared for her as Nellie had once done, but Nellie herself faded from view. Muriel's 1937 memoir refers only to the "genius" of an unnamed "ex-factory-girl helper" at Bruce Road, a conventional tribute that Koven finds "painful reading." Even the manila envelope in which he discovered Nellie's letters has vanished in a restructuring of the archives. Yet Koven's research brings her back to life, her experiences shedding an unexpected light on the revolutionary Christianity of Kingsley Hall. His imaginative book, at once an immaculate social and religious history and an intriguing exercise in life-writing, gives both the heiress and the match girl their due. □



The historian John Hope Franklin, who died in 2009, would have turned one hundred this year. I have thought of him often in recent months as we have seen a conservative Republican governor call for the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State House grounds, as the Democratic Party has renamed the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in order to distance itself from two slave-owning forebears, as Yale University debates removing the name Calhoun from one of its undergraduate colleges.

Many Americans in 2015 seem to be undertaking an unprecedentedly clear-eyed look at the nation's past, at the legacy of slavery and race that has made us anything but a colorblind society. There could be no more fitting tribute to Franklin's one hundredth birthday than this collective stock-taking, for no one has done more to delineate the contours of that shameful legacy and to insist upon its importance to America's present and future. And in that effort he has also done something more for history itself: insisting not just upon its relevance, but indeed its preeminence as the indispensable instrument of change and even salvation from legacies that left unexamined will destroy us. "Good history," he remarked in 1989, "is a good foundation for a better present and future."

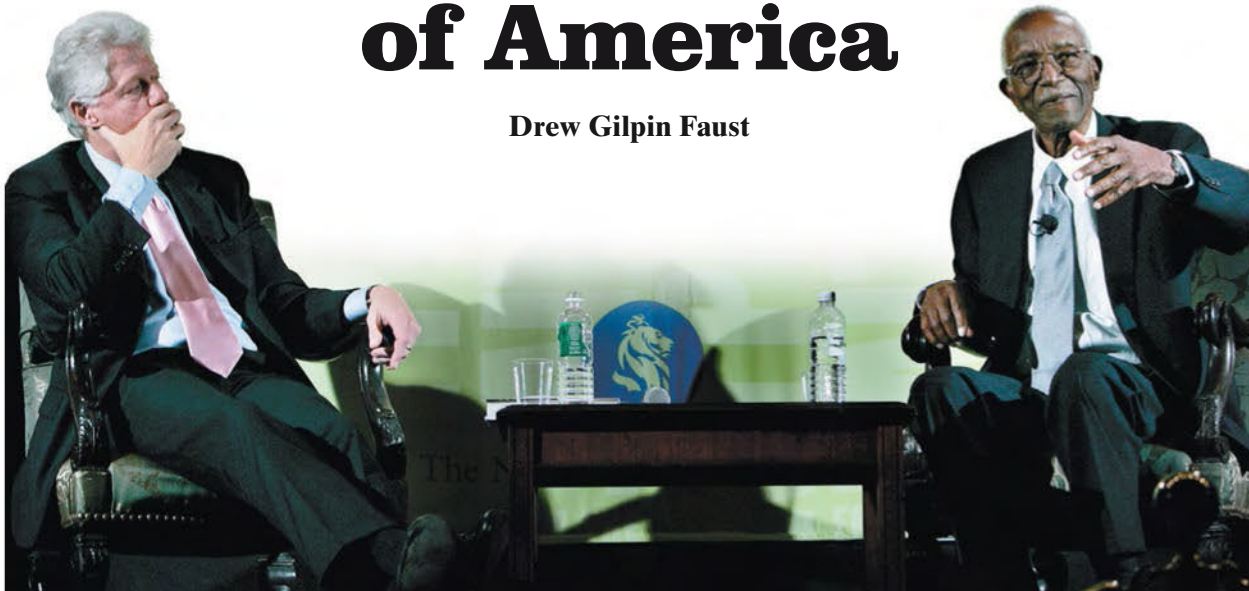
Franklin's childhood in segregated Oklahoma introduced him to racism's cruelties at an early age. He was just six when he and his mother were ejected from a train for sitting in a white-only car. His father was so embittered by his treatment as a black lawyer that he moved his family to an all-black town after resolving to "resign from the world dominated by white people." Yet Franklin's parents insisted that he was the equal of any other human being, and his mother repeatedly urged him to tell anyone who asked him about his aspirations that he planned to be "the first Negro president of the United States." If you believe in yourself, his mother urged, "you won't be crying; you'll be defying."

Defying, not crying. That captures John Hope Franklin's life, and it captures the history he wrote, a history that would, in his words, "attempt to rehabilitate a whole people" and serve them as a weapon of collective defiance. Inspired by a brilliant teacher at Fisk University, Franklin came to see how "historical traditions have controlled... attitudes and conduct," and how changing history, challenging the truth of the "hallowed past," was the necessary condition for changing the present and future. In important ways, the study of history was for Franklin not a choice; it was an imperative. "The true scholar," he wrote in 1963, "must pursue truth in his field; he must, as it were, ply his trade.... If one tried to escape,... he would be haunted;... he would be satisfied in no other pursuit." History, in the many meanings of the term, chose him.

But the "Negro scholar," Franklin wrote, should not imagine he could dis-

# John Hope Franklin: Race & the Meaning of America

Drew Gilpin Faust



Bill Clinton and John Hope Franklin discussing race relations in America at the New York Public Library, October 2005

appear into an ivory tower. The choice to "turn his back on the world" was not available. From Jonathan Edwards, to Thomas Jefferson, to Ralph Waldo Emerson, to John Kenneth Galbraith, Franklin observed, the American scholar had been drawn into policy and the practical. The black scholar must fully embrace this tradition of American intellectual life. "I now assert," Franklin proclaimed,

that the proper choice for the American Negro scholar is to use his history and ingenuity, his resources and talents, to combat the forces that isolate him and his people and, like the true patriot that he is, to contribute to the solution of the problems that all Americans face in common.

Fundamental to the task at hand would be rewriting the history of history, revising the "hallowed" falsehoods, illustrating how the abuse and misuse of history served to legitimate systems of oppression not just in the past but in the present as well. Misrepresentations of the past, Franklin came to recognize, had given "the white South the intellectual justification for its determination not to yield on many important points, especially in its treatment of the Negro." Post-Civil War southerners had endeavored to "win with the pen what they had failed to win with the sword."

Franklin detailed the way the antebellum South rewrote the history of the American Revolution to justify its increasing commitment to slavery, how the popular history represented by the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* worked to justify the early-twentieth-century revival of the Klan, how in a volume commissioned for a prominent series on southern history, respected historian E. Merton Coulter's racist assumptions produced a distorted view of Reconstruction that made an implicit argument against the extension of civil rights in the years immediately following World War II.

But Franklin did not simply critique and revise; he did not just overturn existing interpretations by bringing a

different lens to bear, or even by just grounding the narrative of the past in what were quite revolutionary assumptions of common human capacity and dignity. Franklin, the scholar, unearthed reams of new facts—facts no one had bothered to look for previously, facts buried in archives, newspapers, government records, facts no historian had searched for until history decided black lives mattered.

Franklin's approach to the doing of history is perhaps most faithfully and explicitly chronicled in the introduction to his biography of the nineteenth-century African-American historian George Washington Williams. A pioneer in charting the black experience, Williams, who died in 1891, had been all but forgotten until Franklin began "stalking" him. Franklin recounts the story of how over three decades he traveled to countless offices, libraries, and archives on three continents. He pursued clues and leads with imagination and unquenchable curiosity until he was able to piece together a full portrait of the man and his work. Franklin rescued Williams from oblivion to install him in his rightful place as a pathbreaking black intellectual, a precursor to Franklin himself in creating a true history of the nation's past and the place of African-Americans within it.

The kind of exhaustive research Franklin undertook and described for this biography underpinned all his efforts to expand the scope of American history. He discovered the ironies and contradictions of American unfreedom in the lives of free blacks in antebellum North Carolina; he demonstrated how the pervasive presence of violence shaped and controlled every aspect of white—as well as black—lives in southern slave society; he illustrated the hunger for liberation in the records of runaways determined to free themselves. And in *From Slavery to Freedom* (1958) he sought to create an overarching American and global narrative to explain it all. The book has sold more than three million copies.

Even Franklin, who had personally felt the brunt of segregation, who had understood the terrors of racial violence and oppression, was sobered by what he found. Writing *From Slavery to Freedom*, piecing together a compre-

hensive account of five hundred years of black history, brought tales of horror before his eyes:

I had seen one slave ship after another... pile black human cargo into its bowels.... I had seen them dump my ancestors at New World ports as they would a load of cattle and wait smugly for their pay.... I had seen them beat black men... and rape black women until their ecstasy was spent leaving their brutish savagery exposed. I had heard them shout, "Give us liberty or give us death," and not mean one word of it.... I had seen them lynch black men and distribute their ears, fingers, and other parts as souvenirs.... I had seen it

all, and in the seeing I had become bewildered and yet in the process lost my own innocence.

The past and present of racial oppression in America angered Franklin. His own treatment in graduate school, in the profession, in humiliating incidents that occurred till the very last years of his life provoked him to express his outrage—in autobiographical writings and in what he called "literary efforts" that he refrained from publishing. He was scrupulous and insistent that such emotions and any of what he called "polemics" or "diatribes" should not "pollute" his scholarly work. Yet he acknowledged that "the task of remaining calm and objective is indeed a formidable one."

Franklin reserved a particularly vehement resentment for any effort to co-opt or distort his own historical work—to undermine its truths in support of a particular agenda. What he came to regard as one of the worst of such incidents occurred in the early 1960s when the US Commission on Civil Rights invited him to write a history of civil rights since the nation's founding, to be completed in time for the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1963. When Franklin delivered the manuscript, however, it was greeted with disappointment by commission members who had anticipated "a note of greater tolerance and moderation." Franklin reminded the commission that the history of blacks in the United States was "not a pretty picture," and continued, "I am afraid that I cannot 'tidy up' the history that Americans themselves have made." Forty years later, Franklin still deplored the commission's "blatant and crude use of me in its effort to present a false picture of 'Negro progress.'" Just as bad, it was also a blatant and crude use of history.

The truth that was at once scholarship's product and purpose must not be undermined. The black scholar, he wrote, "must understand the difference between hard-hitting advocacy on the one hand and the highest standards of scholarship on the other." This commitment embraced both idealism and instrumentalism. I am struck as I reread



John Hope Franklin's meditations on history by his sense of vocation, by the awe with which he regarded the role of scholar, by the almost sacred language with which he spoke of what I fear is today now more often regarded as just another job or profession. For Franklin, it was a transcendent calling, one that in the logic of his era and origins should have been unattainable for him.

Franklin recognized an irony in this. The black scholar must "pursue truth while, at the same time, making certain that his conclusions are sanctioned by universal standards developed and maintained by those who frequently do not even recognize him." The revisionist history Franklin sought would, he believed, be unassailable, would overtake past interpretations and exert its force in changing the world because it would, within the clearly articulated standards of the prevailing historical enterprise, be more exhaustively researched, more powerfully argued. It would be a quintessential use of the master's tools to take down the master's house. Franklin had a deep and inextinguishable faith in the power of an accurate and just history to change the world. It was, as he put it, "armed with the tools of scholarship" that he did battle against laws, superstitions, prejudices designed to destroy "humane dignity" and even "his capacities for survival."

Yet the historian did not need to be entirely confined to the realm of pure scholarship. The tools of history could also—though separately—be deployed in policy work where past realities could illuminate pressing contemporary dilemmas. Perhaps the most meaningful of such engagements for Franklin was his work with Thurgood Marshall and the team of lawyers and advisers building the case against school segregation for *Brown v. Board of Education*. The legislative history of the Fourteenth Amendment would be a crucial element in the case. This was an instance, Franklin proclaimed with some pride, of "historians to the rescue!" In this circumstance, he deemed it appropriate to present his findings "like a lawyer's brief," rather than aspiring to the more "objective" and dispassionate stance of the disinterested scholar.

Ultimately, Franklin concluded as he looked back, "I could not have avoided being a social activist even if I had wanted to," but the tensions between this activism and his scholarly ideals compelled him throughout his long life to self-consciously negotiate the treacherous shoals between advocacy and objectivity. "While I set out to advance my professional career on the basis of the highest standards of scholarship," he observed in his autobiography, "I also used that scholarship to expose the hypocrisy underlying so much of American social and race relations. It never ceased being a risky feat of tightrope walking."

In 1980, in an address that marked his departure from the University of Chicago, where he had taught for sixteen years—what proved to be only his first retirement—Franklin announced an explicit shift in perspective in relation to the past. With now unimpeachable credentials as a highly distinguished historian, with a large and influential oeuvre of historical writing, and as the

recipient of almost every imaginable honor, he perhaps felt the burden of establishing legitimacy partially lifted. He had earned the right and freedom to speak his mind. Up to this point in his career, he said, he had regarded himself as among "the faithful disciples of Clio, concerned exclusively, or at least primarily, with the past." He had for four decades, he said, left it to "sociologists, political scientists, and soothsayers" to chart a course for the future. But now, as he was leaving formal teaching responsibilities, "I propose to shift my focus and to dare to think of Clio's having a vision of the future."

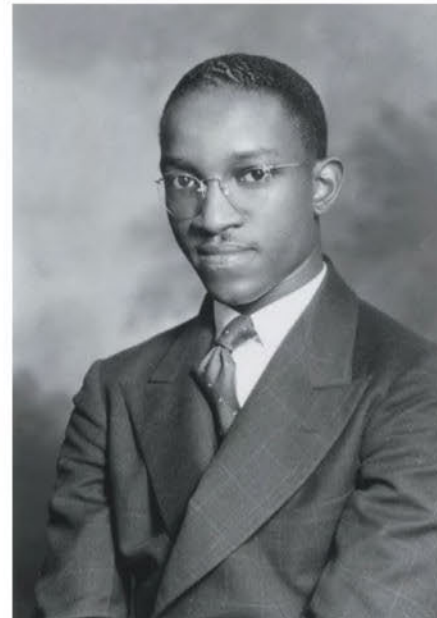
In actuality, Franklin can hardly be said to have abandoned his accustomed rigorous historical research during the twenty-nine remaining years of his life. Nor had he been entirely silent about the future in his first sixty-five years. His evolution would perhaps better be described as an expansion of focus rather than a shift. But as the twentieth century approached its end, Franklin began to envision the century to come and to anticipate the persistence of race and its legacy into a new time.

In April 1992, while Franklin was in the air en route to the University of Missouri to deliver a series of endowed lectures, a Simi Valley, California, jury announced the acquittal of the Los Angeles police officers who had beaten Rodney King. By the time he reached the St. Louis airport, Los Angeles had erupted in riots that ultimately killed fifty-three people before the California National Guard was summoned to quell the violence. For Franklin, these events seemed a tragic affirmation of the argument at the core of his already-prepared Missouri lectures: racism, "the most tragic and persistent social problem in the nation's history," had not been eliminated—even with the notable progress of the civil rights movement. As W.E.B. Du Bois had proclaimed the problem of the twentieth century to be "the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea," so now Franklin cast his eyes forward to declare it the fundamental challenge for the twenty-first. "I venture to state categorically," he proclaimed, "that the problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of the color line."

And again (or still) he worried about willful distortions of history—this time including more recent emerging histories—that threatened to undermine the nation's capacity to confront and eliminate racial injustice. The myth of a colorblind society, often erected upon a cynical celebration of the achievements of civil rights legislation and the Voting Rights Act, was being developed in the 1980s and 1990s, Franklin believed, to end the struggle for racial equality by proclaiming it already achieved. "A color-blind society does not exist in the United States," Franklin stated emphatically to his Missouri audience, "and never has existed." But to advance the myth, Franklin asserted, was not simply a delusion; it was a far more pernicious act of bad faith. "Those who insist we should conduct ourselves as if such a utopian state already existed have no interest in achieving it and, indeed, would be horrified if we even approached it."

*Brown* had, in Franklin's words, been "no magic wand." "Litigation, legislation, and executive implementation,

however effective some of it was, did not wipe away three centuries of slavery, degradation, segregation, and discrimination." Color remained "a major consideration in virtually everything Americans thought, said, or did." Rodney King's beating was clear testimony to the persisting force of race. Today, more than twenty years later, Franklin could deliver the same message. We are neither colorblind nor post-racial. Franklin would have been deeply saddened, but I doubt he would have been surprised, by the events in Ferguson, Staten Island, Charleston, Cleveland, Baltimore. He would have been equally saddened and, one guesses, angered by the recent evisceration of the Voting Rights Act and by the threat to student body diversity in higher education



A photograph of John Hope Franklin from his Harvard University admissions file, circa 1935

implied by the Supreme Court's decision to reconsider *Fisher v. University of Texas*.

In the last months of his life, Franklin was buoyed by the rise of Barack Obama, which he declared "amazing." "I didn't think it would happen in my lifetime." He dared hope that the nation had "turn[ed] a significant corner." But he knew that erasing the color line required far more than electing a black president. Until we had a new history, we could not build a different and better future. The fundamental requirement, what we

need to do as a nation and as individual members of society is to confront our past and see it for what it is. It is a past that is filled with some of the ugliest possible examples of racial brutality and degradation in human history. We need to recognize it for what it was and is and not explain it away, excuse it, or justify it. Having done that, we should then make a good-faith effort to turn our history around.

In other words, it is history that has the capacity to save us. "Historians to the rescue!" Dare we think that the recent rejections of Confederate symbols and of the reputations and legacies of slaveowners might be the opening for such a revisionist and clarifying effort? How can we lodge the truth of history in national discourse and public policy?

In an editorial on September 4, 2015, *The New York Times* underscored how

a full understanding of history must be at the heart of any resolution of America's racial dilemma. In words that come close to echoing Franklin's, the *Times* wrote of what it called the "Truth of 'Black Lives Matter'"—a truth rooted in the legacies of the past. "Demonstrators who chant the phrase," the *Times* noted,

are making the same declaration that voting rights and civil rights activists made a half-century ago. They are not asserting that black lives are more precious than white lives. They are underlining an indisputable fact—that the lives of black citizens in this country historically have not mattered, and have been discounted and devalued. People who are unacquainted with this history are understandably uncomfortable with the language of the movement.

Only if we understand and acknowledge this past can we grapple with the conflicts of the present and the promise of the future.

"To confront our past and see it for what it is," Franklin's words. The past "is." Not the past was. The past lives on. What would it mean to confront it, to see it clearly? Recent history can offer us some examples of nations that have taken on the burden of their history. Germany and its Nazi past. South Africa and apartheid. The principle, and in South Africa an explicit policy and practice, was that of "truth and reconciliation," a recognition that only a collective investigation and acknowledgment of past wrongs can exorcise them and liberate a nation and a people for a better future. History must move beyond the academy, must become a recognized part of everyday life and understanding for all those who would themselves be free from its weight.

Recently, two powerful new advocates have taken up Franklin's call for history to come to America's rescue, echoing many of his observations and insights for a new time and across new and different media. These two twenty-first-century black intellectuals are outside the formal precincts of the academy, yet speak explicitly about why historical scholarship and understanding must play a central part in addressing the tragedies of race in American life. They offer us new, yet in many senses familiar, ways of approaching a moment when it seems possible that both history and policy might change.

Nearly a half-century younger than Franklin, Bryan Stevenson, who grew up in segregated southern Delaware, remembers saving his money for a first youthful book purchase: *From Slavery to Freedom*. Stevenson's life and work reflect the historical sensibility that characterized Franklin's understanding of the American present. In a TED Talk that has been viewed more than two and a half million times, in a best-selling book, and in a life dedicated to the pursuit of equal justice, Stevenson has joined in summoning history to the rescue.

Before the Civil War, we as a nation created a narrative of racial difference to legitimize slavery, he explains, and we convinced ourselves of its truth. As a result, instead of genuinely ending slavery, we helped it evolve into a



succession of new forms of unfreedom, culminating in today's mass incarceration. "Burdened" by a past of racism and cruelty, "we don't like to talk about our history," he observes. We have been "unwilling to commit ourselves" to a necessary "process of truth and reconciliation," so we have not succeeded in transcending our past, in confronting and abandoning its assumptions and inequities. We have been too "celebratory" about the civil rights movement; we "congratulated ourselves too quickly" that the ugliness of racism was eliminated when it continued to infuse our institutions and our attitudes.

Aside from his teaching at NYU, Stevenson's day job is directing the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama—suing to stay executions of innocent prisoners, persuading the Supreme Court that children should not be tried as adults and sentenced to death or life imprisonment. But he has made himself a historian as well. The EJI recently issued a detailed report on the slave trade in nineteenth-century Montgomery—part of a project its website describes as

focused on developing a more informed understanding of America's racial history and how it relates to contemporary challenges. EJI believes that reconciliation with our nation's difficult past cannot be achieved without truthfully confronting history.

EJI joined with the Alabama Historical Commission to sponsor three historical markers in downtown Montgomery memorializing the domestic slave trade in

which the city played such a prominent part. Now Stevenson has embarked on a new project to erect markers at the sites of the thousands of lynchings that terrorized blacks in the post-Civil War South.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, nearly sixteen years younger than Bryan Stevenson, was born six decades after John Hope Franklin. Martin Luther King was seven years dead; much of the hope of the civil rights movement had evaporated; racism, bitterness, and a combination of militancy and despair prevailed. Coates's father, a former member of the Black Panther Party, was an initially self-taught intellectual who became an archivist of black history and created a press to share the record of those of African descent from ancient Egypt to Marcus Garvey to Attica. Paul Coates grounded his son "in history and struggle," lessons that would make Franklin's work seem a bit old-fashioned, conciliatory, perhaps even compromising.

It was Malcolm X who became Ta-Nehisi's hero. "I loved Malcolm because Malcolm never lied.... He was unconcerned with making the people who believed they were white comfortable in their belief." Coates resisted white tools or rules. And he would flee the academy—dropping out of Howard without completing a degree. But he too embraced history. "My reclamation," he wrote, "would be accomplished, like Malcolm's, through books, through my own study and exploration." Perhaps, he mused, "I might write something of consequence someday."

It would seem he has done just that. On the second page of his recent meditation on race, *Between the World and Me*, Coates proclaims, "The answer is American history." His own deep immersion in the past—"I have now morphed into a Civil War buff," he confesses—served as epiphany and impetus: "I could not have understood 20th-century discrimination without understanding its 19th-century manifestations." Searching for a deeper understanding of the forces underlying the realities of black oppression that he already knew so acutely, Coates turned to scholarship and the traditions of African-American history that John Hope Franklin had done so much to build. Coates has mastered the academic literature and from it he has come to understand that slavery was not "ancillary to American history" but "foundational." It remains as a "ghost" all over American policy today, as Coates has demonstrated in his call for reparations to counter the enormous inequities of race reinforced by modern federal housing and zoning legislation.

In Coates's view, whites have been urged away from their real history by myths that have hidden the violence and injustice at its core. America must reject Civil War narratives that have obscured the war's origins in slavery, that have permitted unexamined celebration of Confederate gallantry, and that have turned the "mass slaughter of the war into a kind of sport in which one could conclude that both sides conducted their affairs with courage, honor and élan." The "lie of the Civil War," he explains, "is the lie of inno-

cence." It is a dream, a myth that has lulled and blinded white America as it denied and evaded so much of its past. White Americans "have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs." It is the denial of this history that sustains an emollient innocence and makes the injustices of the present possible.

As John Hope Franklin learned when he undertook the research that he fashioned into *From Slavery to Freedom*, an understanding of history destroys innocence. And the brutal and undeniable truths of murders captured and shared on social media challenge our national presumptions of innocence as well. Can this unavoidable confrontation with the realities of our present open us in new ways to the meaning of our troubling past? Can history help relieve us once and for all of the burden of that ignorance and the evil it can produce? Are we as historians committed—and prepared—to seize this responsibility to extend history beyond the academy? Are we as a nation at last ready to welcome the truth that can yield reconciliation?

If so, it is in no small part because of the kind of history John Hope Franklin dared to write and the ideals he represented as he walked the "tightrope" between engagement and objectivity, as he struggled to unite history with policy and meaningful change, as he sought truths to save us all. Black Lives Matter. History Matters. John Hope Franklin showed us how much they matter to each other. □

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# How Did He Die?: An Exchange

To the Editors:

Tim Parks's engaging review of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* [NYR, November 5] is satisfying on a number of levels, but I was disheartened to see the piece book-ended by the "suicide." Parks's phrase that Levi "threw himself down the stairwell to his death" is not, in any case, an accurate way to describe a tumble over a railing. But the larger issue is that thoughtful and important people close to Levi, who first thought it was a suicide, have reconsidered the event. These people include his cardiologist and friend David Mendel, his lifelong friend Nobel laureate Rita Levi Montalcini, and Fernando Camon. Levi was in a whirl of activities—he'd scheduled an interview for the following Monday, he was considering the presidency of the publishing house Einaudi, he'd just submitted a novel, and that very morning he mailed a plan-filled letter. Add to that the tight dimensions of the stairwell, a railing lower than his waist, recovery from surgery (lowered blood pressure), the number of people who survived Auschwitz and did not kill themselves, and a number of other factors, and the suicide doesn't make sense.

It has been a useful symbol for critics and other writers to hold on to as they imagine the why and how, but it is grossly unfair to the man and to his work. If this crutch is removed, his material can be examined in fresh light—an examination that he deserves.

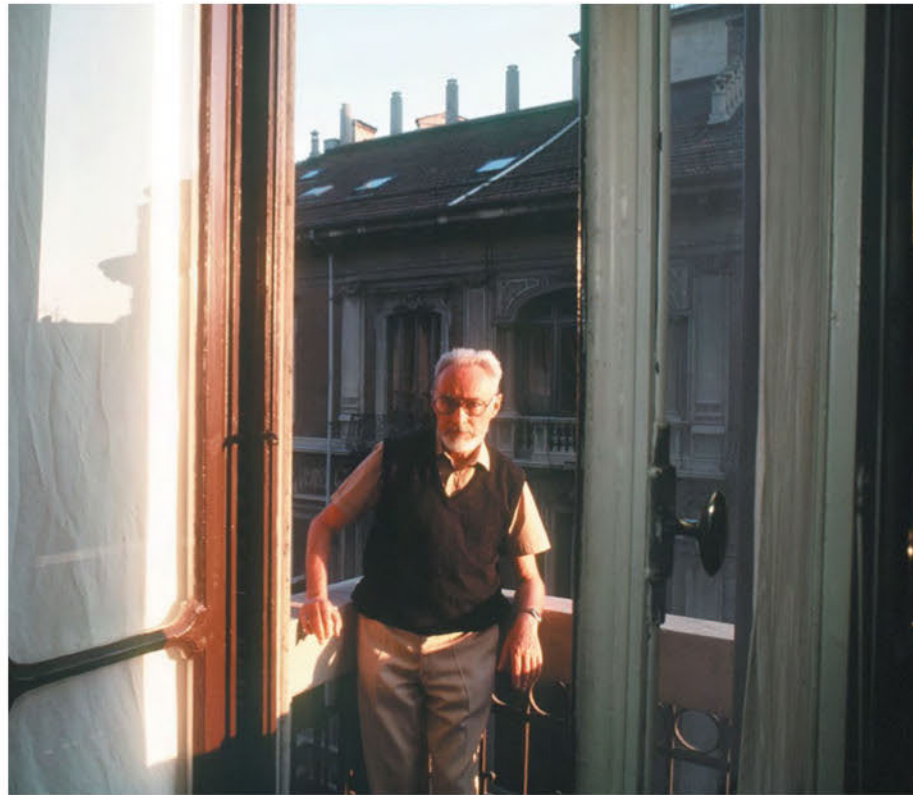
I hope the editors of *The New York Review* will help discourage the story, which, in the cycling of Internet sites, already holds a terrifically strong grip. I would strongly urge you to see this 1999 essay, "Primo Levi's Last Moments" by Diego Gambetta.

**Carolyn Lieberg**  
Washington, D.C.

Tim Parks replies:

"1987—April 11: Levi dies, a suicide, in his apartment building in Turin."

I quote not from a rogue website but from the author chronology provided in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, the book under review. These words, in turn, are a translation of the chronology prepared by Il Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo



Primo Levi, Turin, 1985; photograph by René Burri

Levi in Turin, the most authoritative source of information on Levi; they were actually written by Ernesto Ferrero, for many years Levi's editor at Einaudi, a close friend who knew the author well and spoke to him regularly right through to the end.

The three biographers—Ian Thomson, Carole Angiers, and Myriam Anissimov—who worked intensely on Levi's life, interviewing most of those who knew him, all speak of his suicide as fact. The police on the scene concluded that the death could only have been suicide, this for the simple reason that one does not take a "tumble over a railing" in a Turin apartment block. The Turin law court that heard the evidence surrounding the death agreed and gave its verdict accordingly. In any event it is unthinkable that Levi, a cautious man, would have brought up children and maintained his infirm mother in a building where one could simply tumble over bannisters.

Diego Gambetta's *Boston Review* article, to which Carolyn Lieberg refers me, is an extended exercise in wishful thinking, sometimes disingenuous (as when it claims, for example, that the biographies do not back up their claim that the death was suicide, or omits to mention the family's immediate acceptance of the suicide verdict, or suggests that the height of the railing was abnormally low), sometimes plain wrong, as when it claims that Levi never wrote in favor of suicide. In the story "Heading West" (published in 1971, but interestingly republished shortly before the suicide in 1987), he sympathetically describes a remote tribe who refuse a drug that will put an end to an epidemic of suicides. The chief of the tribe writes, and they are the final words of the story, that the tribe's members "prefer freedom to drugs, and death to illusion." Freedom is always a positive word for Levi.

As early as 1959 Levi had written to his

German translator, Heinz Reidt, that "suicide is an act of will, a free decision." In 1981 when Levi's German teacher, Hanns Engert, hanged himself, Levi was asked to sign a petition claiming it was murder. But the evidence was so overwhelming that he refused: "Hanns killed himself," he said. "Suicide is a right we all have."

This brings us to the moral issue at stake here. Levi was a sworn enemy of denial in all its forms. In *If This Is a Man* he is dismayed when at Auschwitz his friend Alberto convinces himself that his father, just "selected," will not actually be sent to the gas chambers. It is a renunciation of reality, of sanity. Later, he would be equally dismayed that Alberto's parents continued to deny the obvious truth that their son had died in the march away from Auschwitz, preferring to believe that he was somehow safe and well in Russia. In *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi attacks all attempts to find solace in pieties and "convenient truths," in particular the notion that Auschwitz victims, himself included, were somehow sanctified by their experience, their courage and goodness becoming almost a consolation for the awfulness of what had happened: "It is disingenuous, absurd and historically false," he writes, "to argue that a hellish system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims."

Given that Levi's instinct was always to encourage the reader to confront the hardest of facts and not take refuge in any comfort zone, we owe it to him to acknowledge the overwhelming evidence of the way he died. His suicide does not diminish his work or his dignity. He was not obliged to his readers to behave in a reassuring way or protect the illusions they had built around his person. "In my work I have portrayed myself...as...well-balanced," he remarked. "However, I'm not well-balanced at all. I go through long periods of imbalance."

Whatever his reasons for doing what he did, and clearly in the last months of his life he oscillated between deep depression and rare moments of enthusiasm for new projects, Levi was a free man, exercising "a right we all have." "He's done what he'd always said he'd do" were reportedly his wife's words on returning home to discover what had happened.

## LETTERS

### CAMPAIGN FINANCE AND THE COURT

To the Editors:

I am extremely grateful to David Cole for his careful reading and thoughtful critique of *Madison's Music: On Reading the First Amendment* [NYR, November 5]. Precisely because his review essay is so characteristically thoughtful, let me quibble with one important reservation that he advances.

Cole argues that it is not necessary to adopt my plea to read all six clauses of the First Amendment as a coherent narrative of democracy in order to reform our appalling campaign finance jurisprudence. All that is necessary, he suggests, is to tinker with the free speech clause by expanding the meaning of the word "corruption." Under existing free speech precedent, campaign spending can be regulated to prevent "corruption," but the term is narrowly construed to mean only bribery or extortion. Why not, argues Cole, simply expand "corruption" to include undue political influence?

Cole is right, of course, that such a welcome doctrinal change would go a long way to reforming our campaign finance system. But I fear such a change will not happen

unless the Supreme Court realizes that the free speech clause does not stand alone in majestic isolation as a protector of a speaker's autonomy. Rather, it is part of a larger First Amendment made up of six interdependent clauses that, read as a whole, celebrate the arc of a democratic idea.

Once the democracy-reinforcing narrative of the entire First Amendment is acknowledged, it is only a matter of time until the free speech clause is read as democracy's best friend, instead of its hostile disciplinarian. Until the First Amendment's democracy-reinforcing narrative is acknowledged, however, I fear that the Court will continue to turn a deaf ear to pleas to limit the free speech clause by expanding the meaning of "corruption."

**Burt Neuborne**  
Norman Dorsen Professor of  
Civil Liberties  
Founding Legal Director  
Brennan Center for Justice  
New York University  
New York City

David Cole replies:

When the Supreme Court revises First Amendment doctrine to permit greater regulation of campaign finance—and I do mean when, not if—it's conceivable

that the Court will cite Burt Neuborne and adopt his democracy-reinforcing view of the First Amendment. It's also possible that, as I and others have suggested, the Court will expand the scope of "corruption" that justifies limits on campaign spending beyond the unnecessarily narrow conception of quid pro quo bribery and its appearance that now governs First Amendment law. (Indeed, Justice Stephen Breyer's powerful dissent for four justices last year in *McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission* does both, criticizing the majority for disregarding the democracy-enabling character of campaign spending limits and urging a broader conception of corruption.) Or it might take a third route altogether, one that neither Neuborne nor I have articulated.

I'm not sure much turns on the difference in the end. My departure from Neuborne's fine and finely grained analysis is that I don't think the campaign finance mess is principally a problem of doctrinal conception. The problem is a much deeper one, namely, a capitalist system that encourages and protects vast disparities in wealth, and a libertarian ethic that in this setting invites the super-rich to use their resources to hijack the political process. What will change that is not a doctrinal rereading of the First Amendment, but a broader cultural and political shift in the American people.

I am confident that that day will come. There is already widespread agreement that the electoral finance system is broken and needs fixing, and that the Supreme Court is part of the problem. What is needed is not so much a new interpretation of the First Amendment, although that will help, but a constitutional reform campaign that over time transforms the sentiment that there is a problem into action for change, in a multitude of different local, state, and federal forums. If the American people object long enough and loudly enough to an electoral system that allows the rich to run roughshod over the interests of the rest of us, the system will change. The answer, in other words, lies with us. So support the organizations working to change the status quo, including, needless to say, Neuborne's own Brennan Center for Justice.

### HOW HITLER WON POWER

To the Editors:

With regard to the Martin Oppenheimer/Freeman Dyson exchange ["People for Hitler," NYR, November 19], Ian Kershaw, Hitler's biographer, pointed out that the dip in votes (and seats) that the Nazis experienced between July and November 1932 was caused by their decision to support a Communist-led



Berlin workers' strike, which alienated the middle classes. The Nazis gambled that the middle classes would return in future but that the workers would never forgive them. Still, the electoral decline in November, according to Kershaw, threw the Nazis into such disarray as to threaten their future viability as a party. Only the intervention of the elites, by making Hitler chancellor, saved them.

That is how Hitler won power: through contingency and irony, not through an electoral mandate. So it seems that Mr. Oppenheimer has a valid point. How Hitler retained power thereafter is another matter, however, and here Mr. Dyson is surely correct: Hitler's popularity grew because in the short term he fulfilled his promises.

**Albion M. Urdank**  
Department of History, UCLA  
Los Angeles, California

## 'TOO HARD...TO TAKE'

*To the Editors:*

I usually tell my authors that writing letters in response to unfavorable reviews is a mug's game, and here I am playing the mug.

I don't object to Daniel Mendelsohn's disliking my author Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* [NYR, December 3]. Fair's fair in the critical sweepstakes, and it is a challenging and demanding book that asks a lot of its readers in respect to stamina and facing up to some ugly (imagined) facts. What I do object to, however, is his implication that my author has somehow, to use his word, "duped" its readers into feeling the emotions of pity and terror and sadness and compassion.

In the first place, as we all know and as Nabokov on numerous occasions was pleased to remind us, art is at bottom an elaborate con game, but one whose techniques are designed to lead us by degrees into a realm of authentic emotion and aesthetic bliss, which justifies the con. When I have felt like crying while reading a novel by Charles Dickens (take your pick) or, to cite a book in a wildly different register, John Williams's *Stoner*, have I been "duped" by those authors? If so, I look forward to being duped in similar fashion many, many times in the future.

Mendelsohn also veers into very weird sociological territory when he suggests that *A Little Life* has somehow been cunningly fashioned to appeal to college students and recent graduates who have been coddled by a permissive and endlessly solicitous university culture into "see[ing] themselves not as agents in life but as potential victims." Man up, young readers of America! This suggests that we should perhaps sticker the copies of *A Little Life* that we are shipping to college bookstores with the newly fashionable trigger warnings.

His assertion is wrong on two counts. In the first place at a hefty price of \$30.00 full retail I doubt that *A Little Life* has found all that many buyers among the perennially cash-strapped postgraduate set. Secondly, I've received a simply extraordinary flood of e-mails from readers of, ahem, mature years, people who have been around the block and presumably made of sterner stuff than those putative softies, testifying to the powerful effect the book has had on them. Hardened souls and hard ones to dupe.

At bottom Mendelsohn seems to have decided that *A Little Life* just appeals to the wrong kind of reader. That's an invidious distinction unworthy of a critic of his usually fine discernment.

**Gerald Howard**  
Executive Editor, Doubleday  
New York City

**Daniel Mendelsohn replies:**

It can be neither pleasant nor easy for Gerald Howard to have to defend his author's now popular and acclaimed book against a complaint that he himself made as it was being written: that the preposterous excess

of humiliation and suffering heaped on the protagonist by its author (along with the character's improbable array of compensatory expertises) both defies verisimilitude and alienates the sensible reader. Here is Howard, as quoted in *Kirkus Reviews*:

It is perhaps inevitable that there would be some "tussles," as Howard puts it, between him and Yanagihara about the published version of *A Little Life*. They were mainly about the punishment that Jude suffers. "This is just too hard for anybody to take," Howard told her.... "You have made this point quite adequately, and I don't think you need to do it again." Yanagihara says that Howard also thought Jude was too unbelievably talented.... Not many passages that were up for cutting were cut.

My larger point was that Yanagihara's slathering-on of trauma is, in the end, a crude and inartistic way of wringing emotion from the reader—an assaultive repetitiveness that can hardly claim to be one of the "techniques...designed to lead us by degrees into a realm of authentic emotion and aesthetic bliss" that Howard rightly mentions as a hallmark of a genuine novelistic achievement.

For this reason I believe Ms. Yanagihara achieves her effects dishonestly, which is obviously what I meant when I said she "duplicates" her readers into the tears that Mr. Howard now brandishes as a sign of the book's effectiveness—a reaction, whether from young or old, whose basis seems to me more therapeutic than aesthetic. I'm happy to allow that another word might be better than "duped": "Cheated"? "Pandered to"? Mr. Howard can take his pick. One only wishes that he had imposed as stringent an editorial oversight on his author as he would do on her reviewers.

## THE BIRTH OF LANGUAGE

*To the Editors:*

Steven Mithen remarks that what distinguishes us from other apes is our possession of language ["On Ancestor Apes in Europe," NYR, November, 19]. He says: "Language was the vehicle for a new type of thought that provided *Homo sapiens* with their competitive edge over all other species as they dispersed from Africa 70,000 years ago. The use of language created a new dynamic of culture change."

It is not that I disagree with this, but we should note how unexplanatory it is. First, what was that "new type of thought" exactly, and why did language make it possible? How does language (sounds, signs) make any type of thought possible that was not already possible? What about the communicative aspects of language?

Second, how did language itself arise? Agreed, once language arises it makes many things possible, but why did we alone among the apes develop a complex kind of language? This is the question we need to answer, and it is very difficult; you might as well say that we diverged from our ape brethren because we were just so much cleverer. Yes, but how and why did we become so much cleverer? In order to originate language the human mind had to have a massive amount of cognitive machinery already in place; the problem is explaining how this came to be. Mithen has named a problem, not solved one.

**Colin McGinn**  
Miami, Florida

**Steven Mithen replies:**

I completely agree with Colin. My humble attempts at answering the profound questions he raises are in my 1996 book *The Prehistory of the Mind* and my 2005 book *The Singing Neanderthals*. Good luck to Colin and any others in their own attempts to address what are perhaps the most important

## CultureAmerica

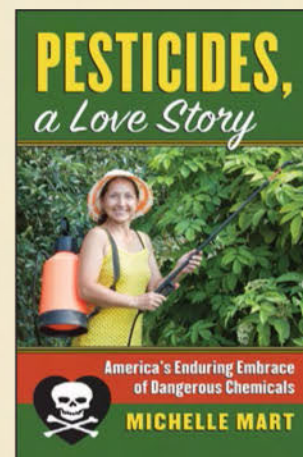
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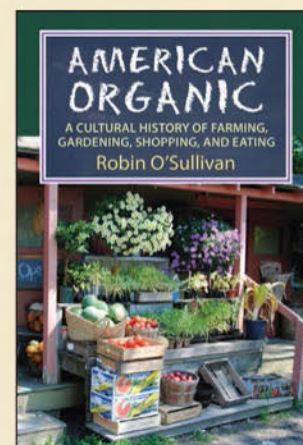


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### WHEN MOTHERS NEGLECT CHILDREN

To the Editors:

It is entirely possible, as narrated by Helen Epstein in “The Strange Politics of Saving the Children” [NYR, November 5], that former UNICEF official Alessandro Conticini’s suspicions that emergency nutritional packets for severely malnourished children were being sold on the market by the children’s mothers were accurate.

But then Ms. Epstein goes on to astonishingly assert that “in impoverished regions the world over, the bond between mothers and children forms slowly; loving a baby who probably won’t survive carries enormous emotional risk and many poor women neglect sick children, assuming they’ll die no matter what.” Subsequently, Ms. Epstein states that Mr. Conticini “introduced a program to help mothers reconnect with their sick children,” which saw the children recover.

Such assertions challenge African credibility at least, and are bound to deeply offend many Ethiopians and others. They cannot be made in this offhand manner on the basis of one person’s observations, as if this is an established fact recognized universally. Interpretations of the kind Ms. Epstein draws surely need to be supported by trained anthropologists, who might indeed find them to be accurate—or find that the mothers’ actions indicate deep mother-child affection of a kind not known in the West.

Let me add to this issue of mothers not having close bonds with unwell children. In 1984, the actress Liv Ullman, who had just returned from a firsthand look at the crushing Ethiopian famine on behalf of UNICEF, was asked at a media encounter in Los Angeles why some mothers had been seen abandoning or giving away their very sick children. She replied in the gentlest way:

I do not think we should see the mothers as abandoning their children. I have seen hundreds or thousands of Ethiopian mothers in the last week clinging to their children to somehow bring fresh life into them. Yes, there is an occasional desperate mother who cannot stand it anymore. Do not see them as abandoning children. These are mothers who have been abandoned by their societies, and by us in the rich countries.

Distressing actions of those suffering severe impoverishment, hunger, or oppression do need to be professionally studied, but within the context of the fullest compassion.

Salim Lone

Spokesman for Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga, 2007–2012  
Princeton, New Jersey

Helen Epstein replies:

I thank Salim Lone for his letter. The point I made about the fragility of the mother-child bond was not meant to refer to Ethiopians or Africans in particular. It is seen in many societies where women are forced to live with the stress of poverty, including the West before the development of the welfare state.

The most comprehensive anthropological studies of this have been conducted by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and colleagues in Brazil, India, the UK, and other societies. See for example Scheper-Hughes’s *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (1992); *Child Survival: Anthropological Perspectives on the Treatment and Maltreatment of Children*, edited by Scheper-Hughes (1987); and Claudio F. Lanata, “Children’s Health in Developing Countries: Issues of Coping, Child Neglect, and Marginalization” in *Poverty, Inequality and Health: An International Perspective*, edited by David Leon and Gill Walt (2001).

For historical studies of child neglect in the West, see Philippe Ariés, *Centuries of Childhood* (1960); Lawrence Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977); and David Lancy, *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings* (2015).

I apologize for not including these sources in the published article.

### THANK YOU, TRANSLATORS

To the Editors:

I read with some astonishment the review by Stacy Schiff of two new books on Nabokov [NYR, November 19]. The first of them was the collection of letters to Vera, his wife, translated and edited by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd. Nowhere in Schiff’s review was either Voronina or Boyd mentioned. Has *The New York Review* suddenly taken a dismissive view of the art of translation? Is it now an enterprise unworthy of criticism? Is scholarly editorial work viewed as trivial?

The thoughtlessness of reviewers who fail to give proper attention and credit to the work of translators and scholars is perhaps unexceptional, but the failure of the editors of *The New York Review* to insist that editors and translators deserve, at a minimum, acknowledgment and perhaps even praise or chastisement is inexcusable. The fact is that Voronina (a colleague here at Bard) and Boyd, through elegant translations of daunting prose and a meticulous scholarly apparatus, have provided an indispensable and authoritative volume for readers interested in the subject of Nabokov, even if they read Russian.

Leon Botstein

President  
Bard College  
Annandale-On-Hudson, New York

### CORRECTION

Richard Pipes [“Stalin: ‘He Couldn’t Have Done It Without Them,’” *NYR*, December 3] is the author, most recently, of *Alexander Yakovlev: The Man Whose Ideas Delivered Russia from Communism*.

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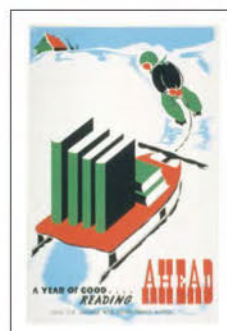
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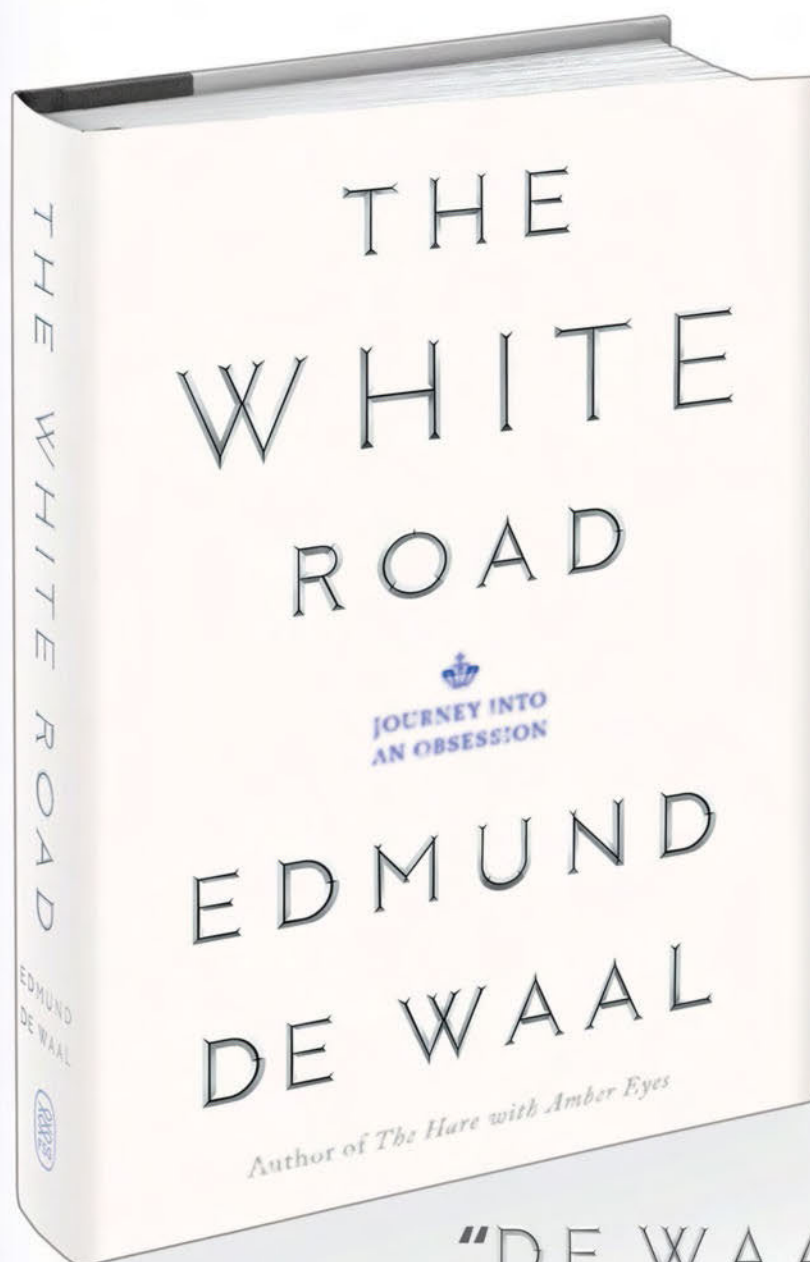
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